OTHER PEOPLE'S BUSINESS

HARRIET LUMMIS SMITH

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The Romantic Career of the Practical Miss Dale

By

HARRIET LUMMIS SMITH

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCING PERSIS

THE knocking at the side door and the thumping overhead blended in a travesty on the anvil chorus, the staccato tapping of somebody's knuckles rising flute-like above the hammering of Joel's cane. To some temperaments the double summons would have proved confusing, but Persis Dale dropped her sewing and moved briskly to the door, addressing the ceiling as she went. "'Twon't hurt you to wait."

The stout woman on the steps entered heavily and fell into a chair that creaked an inarticulate protest. Persis' quick ear caught the signal of distress.

"Mis' West, you'd be more comf'table in the arm-chair. I fight shy of it because it's too comf'table. If I set back into the hollow, it's because my work's done for the day. And here's a palm-leaf. You look as hot as mustard-plaster."

Having thus tactfully interfered for the preserva-

tion of her property, Persis cast a swiftly appraising glance at the chair her caller had vacated. "Front rung sprung just as I expected," was her unspoken comment. "It's a wonder that Etta West don't use more discretion about furniture."

Mrs. West dabbed her moist forehead with her handkerchief, flopped the palm-leaf indeterminately and cast an alarmed glance heavenward. "Gracious, Persis, first thing you know, he'll be coming through."

"'Twon't hurt him to wait," Persis said again, as if long testing had proved the reliability of the formula. "He called me up-stairs fifteen minutes ago," she added, "to have me get down the 'cyclopedia and find out when Confucius was born."

"I want to know," murmured Mrs. West, visibly impressed. "He's certainly got an active mind."

"He has," Persis agreed dryly. "And it's the sort of mind that makes lots of activity for other folks' hands and feet. Does that noise worry you, Mis' West? For if it does, I'll run up and quiet him before we get down to business."

Mrs. West approved the suggestion. "I brought my black serge," she explained, "to have you see if it'll pay for a regular making-over—new lining and all—or whether I'd better freshen it up and get all

the wear I can out of it, just as 'tis. But I declare! With all that noise over my head, I wouldn't know a Dutch neck from a placket-hole. I don't see how you stand it, Persis, day in and day out."

"There's lots in getting used to things," Persis explained, and left the room with the buoyant step of a girl. She looked every one of her six and thirty years, but her movements still retained the ardent lightness of youth. Beaten people drag through life. Only the unconquered move as Persis moved, as though shod with wings.

The anvil chorus ceased abruptly when Persis opened the door of her brother's room. She entered with caution for the darkness seemed impenetrable, after the sunny brightness of the spring afternoon. Joel Dale's latest contribution to hygienic science was the discovery that sunshine was poison to his constitution. Not only were the shutters closed, and the shades drawn, but a patch-work bed-quilt had been tacked over the window that no obtrusive ray of light should work havoc with his health. Joel's voice was hoarsely tragic as he called to his sister to shut the door.

"I'm going to as soon as I can find my way to the knob. It's so pitch-dark in here that I'm as blind as an owl till I get used to it."

"Maybe 'twould help your eye-sight if you was the one getting poisoned," Joel returned sarcastically in the querulous tones of the confirmed invalid. "I've 'suffered the pangs of three several deaths,' as Shakespeare says, because you left the door part way open the last time you went to the 'cyclopedia." For twenty years Joel had been an omnivorous reader, and his speech bristled with quotations gathered from his favorite volumes, and generally tagged with the author's name. The quotations were not always apt, but they helped to confirm the village of Clematis in the conviction that Joel Dale was an intellectual man.

By the time Persis had groped her way to the bed, she was sufficiently accustomed to the dim light to be able to distinguish her brother's restless eyes gleaming feverishly in the pallid blur of his face. "What do you want now, Joel?" she asked, with the mechanical gentleness of overtaxed patience.

"Persis, there's a text o' Scripture that's weighing on my mind. I can't exactly place it, and I've got to know the context before I can figure out its meaning. 'Be not righteous over-much, neither make thyself over-wise. Why shouldst thou destroy thyself?' That's the way it runs, as near as

I can remember. Now if righteousness is a good thing and wisdom too, why on earth—"

"Goodness, Joel! I don't believe that's anywhere in the Bible. Sounds more like one of those old heathens you're so fond of reading. And anyway," continued Persis firmly, frustrating her brother's evident intention to argue the point. "I can't look it up now. Mis' West's down-stairs."

"Come to discuss the weighty question o' clothes, I s'pose. 'Bonnets and ornaments of the legs, wimples and mantles and stomachers,' as the prophet says. And that's of more importance than to satisfy the cravings of a troubled mind. If the world was given up to the tender mercies o' women, there'd be no more inventions except some new kind of crimping pin, and nothing would be written but fashion notes."

"I'll have to go now, Joel." Persis Dale, having supported her brother from the time she was a girl of seventeen, had enjoyed ample opportunity to become familiar with his opinion of her sex. As the manly qualities had declined in Joel, his masculine arrogance had waxed strong. The sex instinct had become concentrated in a sense of superiority so overwhelming that the woman was not born whom Joel would not have regarded as a creature of

inferior parts, to be patronized or snubbed, as the merits of the case demanded.

"Do you want a drink of water?" Persis asked, running through the familiar formula. "Shall I get you a fan, or smooth out the sheets? Then I guess I'll go down, Joel. I wouldn't pound any more for a while, if I was you. 'Twon't do any good."

The sound of voices greeted her, as she descended the stairs, Mrs. West's asthmatic tones blending with the flutey treble of a young girl. "It's Diantha," thought Persis, her lips tightening. "I might have known that Annabel Sinclair would send for that waist two days before it was promised."

The young girl sitting opposite Mrs. West was perched lightly on the edge of her chair like a bird on the point of flight, and the skirt of her blue cotton frock was drawn down as far as possible over a disconcerting length of black stocking. Her fair hair was worn in curls which fell about her shoulders. Fresh coloring and regularity of feature gave her a beauty partially discounted by an expression of resentful defiance, singularly at variance with her general rosebud effect.

"Mother sent me to see if her waist was ready,

Miss Persis." Diantha spoke like a child repeating a lesson it has been kept after school to learn.

"It won't be done till Saturday, Diantha. I told your mother Saturday when she sent the goods over."

The girl rose nimbly, the movement revealing unexpected height and extreme slenderness, both qualities accentuated by her very juvenile attire. She made a bird-like dart in the direction of the door, then turned.

"Mother said I was to coax you into finishing it for to-morrow," she announced, a light mockery rasping under the melody of her voice. "I know it won't do any good, but I've got to be obedient. Please consider yourself coaxed."

"No, it won't do any good, Diantha. The waist'll be ready about two o'clock on Saturday." Persis stood watching the girl's retreating figure, and the serenity of her face was for the moment clouded.

"Diantha Sinclair reminds me of a Lombardy poplar," remarked Mrs. West. "Nothing but spindle till you're most to the top. It does seem fairly immoral, such a show o' stockings."

"Annabel Sinclair seems to think she can stop

that girl's growing up by keeping her skirts to her knees," returned Persis grimly. "A young lady daughter would be a dreadful inconvenience to Annabel." Then the momentary sternness of her expression was lost in sympathetic comprehension as Mrs. West bowed her head and sprinkled the black serge with her tears.

"There, there, Mis' West. Cry if you feel like it. Crying's the best medicine when there's no men folks around to keep asking what the matter is. Just let yourself go, and don't mind me."

"Of course you know," exclaimed Mrs. West, her fat shoulders heaving as she took full advantage of the permission. "Everybody knows. Everybody's talking about it. To think that a son of mine would stoop to steal a wife's affection away from her lawful husband."

"Don't make things out any worse than they are, Mis' West. Your Thad can't steal what never was. And Annabel Sinclair never had any affection to give her husband nor nobody else."

Mrs. West's distress was too acute to permit her to find comfort in a distinction purely technical. "Thad always was such a good boy, Persis, but now I'm prepared for anything. I think she's capa-

ble of working him up to the point of running away with her."

Again Persis proffered consolation. "I don't think so. Annabel Sinclair's what I call a feeble sinner. She reminds me of Joel when he was a little boy. He'd go down to the river, along in April when the water was ice-cold, and he'd get off his clothes and stand on the bank shivering. After his teeth had chattered an hour or so, mother'd come to look him up and Joel would get into his trousers and go home meek as a lamb. Well, Annabel's the same way. She likes to shiver on the bank and think what a splash she'll make when she goes in, but she hasn't got the courage to risk a wetting, let alone drowning."

Mrs. West, blinking through her tears, looked hard at her friend. "Seems to me you're talking awful peculiar, Persis. 'Most as if you'd respect Annabel more if she was wickeder."

"Maybe I would," acknowledged Persis bluntly. "Seems to me it's almost better to have folks in earnest, if it's only about their sins. Annabel Sinclair turns everything into play-acting, good and bad alike."

"I don't know why Thad can't see through her,"

cried the distracted mother, voicing an age-old wonder. "I used to think he was as smart as chain-lightning, but I've changed my mind. Any man that'll let Annabel Sinclair lead him around by the nose hasn't got any more than just sense enough to keep him out of an asylum for the feeble-minded, if he *is* my son."

"That's where all of 'em belong when it comes to a woman like Annabel," said Persis with unwonted pessimism. "And Thad's just young enough to be proud of having that sort of acquaintance with a married woman. Men are queer cattle, Mis' West. The worst woman living likes to pretend to herself that she's as good as anybody, but a man who's been decent from the cradle up, gets lots of comfort out of thinking he's a regular devil. At the same time," she conceded, with a change of tone, "the thing ought to be stopped."

"Of course it had. But how are we going to do it? I've talked to Thad and talked to him, and so has his father. If I thought the minister would have any influence—"

"You just let Thad alone for a spell," Persis commanded with her usual decision. "And you leave this thing to me. I'll try to think a way out."

This astonishing offer was made in a matter-of-fact tone, significant in itself. Persis Dale earned her living as a dressmaker and pieced out her income by acting as a nurse in the dull seasons, but her real occupation in life was attending to other people's business. She had a divine meddlesomeness. She was inquisitive after the fashion of a sympathetic arch-angel. It appalled her to see people wrecking their lives by indecision, vacillation, incapacity, by poor judgment and crass stupidity. Her homely wisdom, the fruit of observant years, her native common sense, her strength and discernment were all at the service of the first comer. Responsibility, the bugbear of mankind, was as the breath in her nostrils.

"I wouldn't do any more talking to Thad," Persis repeated, as Mrs. West looked at her with the instant confidence of inefficiency in one who indicates a readiness to take the helm. "Don't make him feel that he's so awfully important just because he's making a fool of himself. Most boys attract more attention the first time they kick over the traces than they ever did in all their lives before. 'Tisn't any wonder to me that the elder brother gets a little cranky when he sees the fuss made over

the prodigal, first because he's gone wrong and then because he's going right, same as decent folks have been doing all the time."

"What do you mean to do, Persis?" Mrs. West's tone indicated that by some mysterious legerdemain the burden had been shifted. It was now Persis' problem.

"That'll bear thinking about," Persis returned with no sign of resenting her friend's assumption. "And while I'm turning it over in my mind, let Thad alone, and don't wear yourself out worrying." The injunction probably had a figurative import though Mrs. West interpreted it literally.

"Wear myself *out*. I can't so much as wear *off* a pound. I've been too upset to eat or sleep for the last two months, and I've been gaining right along. Most folks can reduce by going without breakfast, but seems as if it don't make any difference with me whether I touch victuals or not."

She was rising ponderously when Persis checked her. "Your serge, Mis' West. We were going to see if 'twas worth making over."

"It's time to get supper, Persis, and there ain't a mite of hurry about that serge. Truth is," explained Mrs. West, lowering her voice to a confidentical murmur, "'twasn't altogether the dress

that brought me over. I sort of hankered for a talk with you. There never was such a hand as you be, Persis, to hearten a body up."

Persis found no time that evening for grappling with the problem for which she had voluntarily made herself responsible. The preparation of Joel's supper was a task demanding time and prayerful consideration, for as is the case with most chronic invalids, his fastidiousness concerning his food approached the proportions of a mania. Her efforts to gratify her brother's insatiable curiosity on points of history and literature, had put her several hours behind with her sewing, and as she owned to a most unprofessional pride in keeping her word to the letter, midnight found her still at work. A few minutes later she folded away the finished garment and picked from the rag carpet the usual litter of scraps and basting threads, after which she was at liberty to attend to that mysterious rite known to the housekeeper as "shutting up for the night," a rite never to be omitted even in the village of Clematis where a locked door is held to indicate that somebody is putting on airs.

Candle in hand, Persis paused before a photograph, framed in blue plush and occupying a prominent position on the mantel. "Good night,

Justin," she said in as matter-of-fact a tone as if she were exchanging farewells with some chance caller. As the candle flickered, a wave of expression seemed to cross the face in the plush frame, almost as if it had smiled.

It was a pleasant young face with a good forehead and frank eyes. The indeterminate sweetness of the mouth and chin hinted that this was a man in the making, his strength to be wrought out, his weakness to be mastered. Like the blue plush the photograph was faded, as were alas, the roses in Persis' cheeks. It was twenty years since they had kissed each other good-by in that very room, boy and girl, sure of themselves and of the future. Justin was going away to make a home for her, and Persis would wait for him, if need be, till her hair was gray.

He had been unfortunate from the start. Up in the garret, spicy with the fragrance of dried herbs and of camphor, were his letters, locked away in a small horse-hair trunk. Twice a year Persis opened the trunk to dust the letters, and sometimes she drew out the contents of a yellowing envelope and read a line here and there. These were the letters over which she had wept long, long before,—blurred in places by youth's hot tears, the letters

she had carried on her heart. They were full of the excuses in which failure is invariably fertile, breathing from every page the fatal certainty that luck would soon turn.

The letters became infrequent after old Mr. Ware's "stroke." Persis understood. For them there could be no thought of marrying nor giving in marriage while the old man lay helpless. All that Justin could spare from his scant earnings, little enough, she knew, must be sent home. And meanwhile Joel having discovered in a three months' illness his fitness to play the part of invalid, had apparently decided to make the rôle permanent. Like many another, Persis had found in work and responsibility, a mysterious solace for the incessant dull ache at her heart.

That was twenty years before. Persis Dale, climbing the stairs as nimbly as if it were early morning and she herself just turned sixteen, seemed a woman eminently practical. Yet in the changes of those twenty years, though trouble had been a frequent guest under the sloping roof of the old-fashioned house and death had entered more than once, there had never been a time when Persis had gone to her bed without a good night to the photograph in the blue plush frame, never a morning

when she had begun the day without looking into the eyes of her old lover.

The most practical woman that ever made a button-hole or rolled a pie-crust, despite a gray shimmer at her temples and a significant tracery at the corners of her eyes, has a chamber in her heart marked "private" where she keeps enshrined some tender memory. At the core, every woman is a sentimentalist.

CHAPTER II

THE LOVER

THOMAS HARDIN, trudging through the dusk of the spring evening, his shoulders stooping and his hands thrust deep into his pockets, wore an expression better befitting an apprehensive criminal than an expectant lover. As he approached the Dale cottage where the light of Persis' lamp shone redly through the curtained window, his look of gloom increased, and he gave vent to frequent and explosive sighs.

The sense of unworthiness likely to overwhelm the best of men who seek the love of a good woman, was in Thomas' case complicated by a morbidly sensitive conscience and ruthless honesty. To Thomas, Persis Dale represented all that was loveliest in womankind, but he would have resigned unhesitatingly all hope of winning her rather than have gained her promise under false pretenses. "I can stand getting the mitten if it comes to that," Thomas assured himself with a fearful sinking of

the heart, which belied the boast. "But I can't stand the idea of taking her in." When she knew him at his undisguised worst, it would be time enough to consider taking him for a possible better.

Unluckily for his peace of mind, confession was more intricate and protracted than in his complacency he would have believed. It seemed impossible to finish with it. Whenever he nerved himself to the point of putting the question which had trembled on his lips for a dozen years, dark episodes from his past flashed into his memory with the disconcerting suddenness of a search-light, and further humiliating disclosures were in order before he could direct his attention to the business of love-making. Sometimes Thomas felt that his reputation for uprightness was a proof of hypocrisy, and that his friends and neighbors would shrink away aghast if they suspected a fraction of his unsavory secrets.

Persis was alone when Thomas entered. Not till the last lingering tinge of gold had deserted the west, would Joel venture to leave the room barricaded against the hostile element. But at any moment now he might think it safe to risk himself down-stairs, and knowing this, Thomas resolved to waste no time in preliminaries.

"How's your sister and the children?" Persis

asked, shaking hands and returning to her sewing. She offered no excuse for continuing her work, nor did Thomas wish it. There was a delicious suggestion of domesticity in the sight of Persis sewing by the shaded lamp while he sat near enough to have touched the busy fingers, had he but won the right to such a privilege.

"Nellie's well. Little Tom's eyes have been troubling him since he had the measles, but the doctor thinks it's nothing serious. Look here, Persis, I was wondering as I came along if you knew that I *chewed.*"

Persis' lids dropped just in time to hide a quizzical, humorous gleam in her eyes. The rest of her face remained becomingly grave. "I may have suspected it, Thomas."

"It's a filthy habit," he said, inordinately relieved by her astuteness and yet with wonder.

She looked up from her work to explain. "It's this way, Thomas. Sometimes when I go into the store I catch sight of you before you see me, and maybe one of your cheeks will be all swollen up as if you had the toothache. Then you slip into the back room, and come out in quarter of a minute with both of 'em the same size. It's a woman's way, Thomas, to put two and two together."

Thomas' face was radiant. That weight was off his conscience. He had a right to proceed to more agreeable disclosures, undeterred by the fear of practising deception on the noblest of God's creatures. It contributed to his joy that Persis had known of his weakness, and yet had not crushed him with her contempt. She had not even expressed agreement when he had called chewing tobacco a filthy habit.

"Persis," he began in his deepest tones, "I was thinking as I came along—"

The stairs creaked and Persis interrupted him. "There's Joel. It makes it hard for him when the days are getting longer all the time. He'll be glad when we have to light the lamps at five."

Thomas was in a mood to wish that the village of Clematis basked in the rays of the midnight sun. He forced a smile to his reluctant lips as Persis' brother entered and magnanimously put the question, "How do you find yourself to-night, Joel?" though he knew only too well the consequences to which this exposed him. There was no surer passport to Joel's favor than to inquire about his health if one was also willing to listen to his answer. The people who said, "How do you do?" and immediately began to talk of something else were the objects of

Joel's detestation, while his grateful affection went out to the select few willing to hear in detail his physical biography since their last meeting. Joel experienced the same satisfaction in describing the pains in his abdomen or an attack of palpitation that a bride feels in exhibiting her trousseau.

"I've nothing to complain of, especially when you take into account that I'd have been six feet under the sod by now, if I hadn't discovered that sunshine was poison to my constitution. It sort of draws all the vitality out of me, same as it draws the oil out of goose feathers. I'd have improved a good deal faster," Joel continued with sudden irritation, "if it hadn't been for Persis' carelessness in leaving the door open. You'd think that I had a good big life insurance in her favor, the way she acts. As the Frenchman said, 'Defend me from my friends, I can defend myself—' "

"I've always understood that sunshine was about the healthiest of anything," interrupted Thomas, reddening angrily at the criticism of Persis. "And if you want my opinion, you look to me a good deal like a plant that's sprouted in the cellar."

The last thing Joel wanted was another's opinion. He continued as though Thomas had not spoken.

"And besides that, I've been eating too much

meat. Science tells us that the human body is pretty near all water. Don't that show that most of the needs of the body can be supplied by drinking plenty of water?"

Thomas shook his head. "I'd hate to try it. When I'm hungry, I wouldn't swap a good piece of beef-steak for a hogshead of water."

"*You* eat too much meat." Joel, extending an almost transparent hand toward his sister's caller, shook a bony forefinger in warning. "You're undermining your constitution. You're shortening your days by your inordinate use of animal food."

"Me! Why, bless you, Joel, I never was sick a day in my life."

"Well, that don't prove that you never will be, does it? And anybody with half an eye can see that you're not in good shape. Flesh don't show nothing. A man who weighs two hundred is the first to go under when disease gets hold of him. Your color, as like as not, is due to fever. How many times a day do you eat meat?"

"Well, always twice, and sometimes—"

Joel groaned. "Rank suicide! Suicide just as much as if you put a revolver to your head. It sounds well to talk about prime cuts of beef and

all that, but when you come down to cold facts, what's meat? Dead stuff, that's all. It ain't reasonable to talk of building up life out of death."

Persis' quick ear had caught the sound of stealthy movements in the adjoining room. She wove her needle into the seam, a practise so habitual that probably she would have done the same if the lamp had exploded unexpectedly, and crossing to the kitchen door, opened it without warning. A small untidy woman, the shortcoming of her appearance partly concealed by the old plaid shawl that enveloped her person, dodged away from the key-hole with a celerity perhaps due to practise.

"It just struck me that there was more voices than two," she explained with self-accusing haste. "And I didn't want to intrude if you was entertaining company. Sounded to me like Thomas Hardin's voice."

"Yes, it's Mr. Hardin. Will you come in, Mis' Trotter?" Persis' invitation lacked its usual ring of cordiality.

"Oh, I wouldn't want to intrude. But I says to Bartholomew this very day, 'I'm going to run over to Persis Dale's after supper,' says I, 'to see if she can't let me have some pieces of white goods left

over from her dressmaking.' You're doing a good deal in white this time of the year, as a rule," concluded Mrs. Trotter, a greedy look coming into her eyes.

"Mis' Trotter, I always send back the pieces, even if they're no bigger than a handkerchief. If anybody's going to make carpet rags out of the scraps, I don't know why it shouldn't be the people who bought and paid for the goods."

"And that's where you're right," Mrs. Trotter agreed, with the adaptability that was one of her strong points. "There was Mattie Kendall, now, who kept up her dressmaking after she married Henry Beach. Well, she set out to dress her children on the left-overs, and it went all right while they was little. But Mamie got grasping. After her oldest girl was as long-legged as a colt, she'd send word to her customers and say that they needed another yard and a half or two yards to make their dresses in any kind of style. Of course it got out in time, and everybody who wanted sewing done went to a woman in South Rivers. I often say to Bartholomew that honesty's the best policy, even where it looks the other way round."

During the progress of this moral tale, Persis' thoughts had been self-accusing. She reflected that

curiosity is not among the seven deadly sins, and that if Mrs. Trotter found in listening at key-holes any compensation for the undeniable hardships of her lot, only a harsh nature would grudge her such solace. Moreover ingrained in Persis' disposition, was the inability to hold a grudge against one who asked her a favor.

"I don't know, Mis' Trotter, but maybe I've got some white pieces of my own that aren't big enough for anything but baby clothes. I'll look over my piece-bag to-morrow. If there's anything you can use, you'll be welcome."

Mrs. Trotter expressed her appreciation. "With all the sewing I done when Benny was expected, I did think I was pretty well fixed, come what might. I didn't reckon on the twins, you see. And then when little Tom died, they laid him out in the embroidered dress I'd counted on for the christening of the lot. Not that I grudged it to him," added the mother quickly, and sighed.

This had the effect of dissipating Persis' sense of annoyance. "I'm pretty sure I can find you something, Mis' Trotter. And I'll speak to one or two of my customers. Some of 'em may have things put away that they're not likely to want again."

Mrs. Trotter received the offer with a dignity untainted by servile gratitude.

"Me and Bartholomew feel that in raising up a family the size of ourn, we're doing the community a service. So we ain't afraid to take a little help when we happen to need it. And by the way, if you should find some of the white pieces you was talking about, maybe you wouldn't mind cutting out the little slips and just stitching 'em up on your machine. The needle of mine's been broke this six months, and anyway, something's the matter with the wheels. They won't hardly turn."

"Need oil, probably," commented Persis. She knew she was wasting her breath in making the suggestion. The shiftlessness which left the sewing-machine useless junk in a family of eight was a Trotter characteristic. If Bartholomew could have appreciated the value of machine oil, he would have been an entirely different man, and probably able to support his family. In view of this, Persis felt that she could do no less than add: "To be sure I'll stitch 'em up. 'Twon't take much of any time."

"Now I'm not going to keep you a minute longer. I guess Thomas Hardin don't come here to talk to your brother the whole evening." Mrs. Trotter

smiled pleasantly, but with a distinct tinge of patronage, the inevitable superiority of the wedded wife to the woman who has carried her maiden name well through the thirties. And indeed in Mrs. Trotter's estimation, the hardships of her matrimonial experience were trivial in comparison with the unspeakable calamity of being an old maid.

After Joel was once fairly launched on the subject of hygiene, it was difficult, as a rule, to introduce another topic of conversation under an hour and a quarter. Persis was almost startled, on her return, to find the two men discussing an alien theme. More surprising still, instead of sulking over the curtailment of the dear privilege of self-dissection, Joel was plainly interested.

"It's one of the games where you can't lose, if you take their word for it," Thomas was explaining to his absorbed listener. "The company begins to pay you int'rest on your investment just as soon as you hand over the money, six per cent. every year up to the time the orchard gets to bearing. Then it goes up little by little, and by the tenth year they guarantee you twenty-five per cent. Even that doesn't cover it. They say that orchard owners in the same locality are making as much as a hundred

per cent. most years. Anybody who could spare a few thousand would be sure of a good income for the rest of his days."

"But there's the off years," objected Joel, a crackle of greed in his high-pitched voice.

"There's not going to be any off years the way those fellows figure. They say that by thinning out the apples when the yield is heavy, they can be sure of a crop every season." Thomas' gaze wandered to Persis who had resumed her seat and taken up her sewing. "We're talking of a chance to put your money where it'll get more than savings bank int'rest," he said, resolved that Joel should not monopolize every topic of conversation. "The Apple of Eden Investment Company, they call it."

"I heard you say something about twenty-five per cent.," returned Persis, sewing placidly. "'Most *too* good to please me."

"Now if that ain't a woman all over," Joel interjected excitedly. "The toe of a stocking is a good enough bank for any of 'em, and as for using foresight and putting a little capital where it'll bring in an income for your old age, you'd think to hear 'em talk, that such a thing was never heard tell of. If I'd had the handling of the money that's come into this house for the last twenty years, we'd have

been on Easy Street by now. But Persis has the kind of setness that doesn't take no account of reason. And as the poet says:

> " 'He is a fool who thinks by force or skill
> To turn the current of a woman's will.' "

Thomas, purpling with resentment, addressed his next remark to Persis. "I don't s'pose our folks would take so much stock in all these fine promises if there wasn't a Clematis boy secretary of the company. I guess you remember him, Persis. Ware, his name was. Justin Ware."

"Yes, I remember him." An abrupt movement on Persis' part had unthreaded her needle. She bent close to the lamp, vainly trying to insert the unsteady end of the thread into the opening it had so lately quitted.

"I've been telling you right along you needed glasses," triumphed Joel. "And to keep on saying that you don't, ain't going to help the matter. 'When age, old age comes creeping on,' as the poet says—"

"I don't need glasses any more than you need a crutch." The denial came out with a snap. Persis Dale, patient to the point of weakness, enduring submissively for twenty years the thankless exac-

tions of her brother, proved herself wholesomely human by her prompt resentment. "My eyes are as good as they ever were," she insisted, and closed the discussion if she did not prove her point, by putting her work away. Secretary of an investment company making such golden promises! That looked as if at last fortune had smiled on Justin Ware.

The two men had the talk to themselves. Persis' absorption was penetrated now and then by references to the miracles wrought by scientific spraying and pruning, or the possibility of heating orchards so that late frosts would no longer have terrors for the fruit grower, sober facts which the literature of the Apple of Eden Investment Company had enveloped in the rosy atmosphere of romance. Like many people who have never made money by hard work, Joel believed profoundly in making it by magic. His pallid face flushed feverishly, and his eyes glittered as he discussed the possibility of making a thousand dollars double itself in a year.

It was ten o'clock when Thomas again had the field to himself and in Clematis only sentimental visits were prolonged beyond that hour. Thomas' opportunity had arrived, but with it unluckily had come the recollection of a misdeed for which he

must receive absolution before the flood-gates of his heart were opened.

"Persis, do you remember that old Baptist minister who lived opposite the schoolhouse when we were kids? Elder Buck, everybody called him."

With an effo t she set aside her own recollections in favor of his. "Oh, yes, I remember. The one whose false teeth were always slipping down."

"His picket fence was all torn to pieces one night. He had a way of calling names in the pulpit, the elder had,—children of the devil and that sort of thing—and it got some of the boys riled. And to pay him back, they tore down his fence. Persis, I—I was one of those boys."

He looked at her appealingly and felt his heart sink. Persis' eyes were lowered. Her face was grave and a little sad as befits one who has been tendered irrefutable proof of a friend's unworthiness. Thomas gulped. Well, it was only what he had expected all along. A woman like Persis could not be asked to overlook everything.

"Good night, Persis," he said huskily, and he thought it more than his deserts when she answered him with her usual kindness, "Good night, Thomas."

CHAPTER III

A FITTING

DURING the spring and summer Persis rose at half past five, and though she slept little the night following Thomas Hardin's disclosures, she refused to concede to her feeling of weariness so much as an extra half-hour. Her fitful slumbers had been haunted by dreams of apples, apples in barrels, apples in baskets, apples dropping from full boughs and pelting her like hail-stones, for all her dodging. There were feverishly red apples, gnarly green apples and the golden sweets, the favorites of her childhood, all of them turning into goblins as she approached, and leering up at her out of impish eyes which nevertheless bore a startling resemblance to those eyes in whose depths she had once seen only the reflection of her own loyalty. It was small wonder that Persis woke unrefreshed. "I declare," she mused, as she twisted her hair into the unyielding knob,

highly in favor among the feminine residents of Clematis as a morning coiffure, "a few more nights like that would set me against apple pie for good and all."

But the developments of the day were soon to elbow out of Persis' thoughts the visions of the night. As she stepped out on the porch for a whiff of the invigorating morning air, her eyes fell upon a unique figure coming toward her across the dewy grass. In certain details it gave a realistic presentment of an Indian famine sufferer. In respect to costume, it was reminiscent of a bathing beach in mid-July.

"Of all things!" Persis gasped, one hand groping for support, while the other shaded her incredulous and indignant eyes. "Have you taken leave of your senses, Joel Dale?"

Her brother ascended the steps, wearing the expression of triumph ordinarily assumed in honor of his great hygienic discoveries. He replied to her question by another: "Persis, what do you s'pose is at the bottom of all human ills?"

Persis rallied.

"I don't know as I'd undertake to speak for 'em all, but I should say that a good nine-tenths was due to a lack of common sense."

Joel disdained to take up the gauntlet. "Persis, it's clothes."

His sister looked him over. Joel was attired in a pair of bathing trunks and a bath towel, the latter festooned gracefully about his body, low enough to show his projecting ribs. "If the style you're wearing at present was ever to get what you'd call popular," she agreed dryly, "I think it would make considerable trouble."

Joel again refused to be diverted. "Clothes, Persis, are an invention of the devil. The electricity of the body, instead of passing off into the earth as it would do if we went around the way the Lord intended, is kept pent up in our insides by our clothes, and of course it gets to playing the mischief with all our organs. As old Fuller says, 'He that is proud of the rustling of his silks, like a madman laughs at the rattling of his fetters.'"

"The sun is shining right on your bare back," remarked Persis acridly. "According to your ideas yesterday, you'd ought to be ready to drop dead."

Joel magnanimously ignored the taunt. Like some greater men, he had discovered that to be true to to-day's vision, one must often violate yesterday's conviction. The charge of inconsistency never troubled him.

"Earth and air are stuffed with helpfulness, Persis, and the clothes we wear won't give it a chance at us. If the Lord had wanted us to be covered, we'd have come into the world with a shell like a turtle. Now, this rig ain't ideal because we've got to make some concessions to folks' narrowness and prejudice, but it's a long way ahead of ordinary dress."

"Joel Dale!" The grim resolution of Persis' voice warned the dreamer of the family that the limit of her forbearance had been reached. "I'm not going to stand up for clothes, though seeing that my living, and yours too, depends on 'em, it's not for me to run 'em down. But this I will say, as long as we live in a civilized land, we've got to act civilized. And as for having you show yourself on this lawn in a get-up that would set every dog in Clematis to barking, I won't. Go up-stairs and dress like somebody beside a Fiji islander, but first give your feet and legs a good rubbing. If you don't, the next thing you know, you'll be down with pneumonia."

Perhaps Joel's tyrannical rule in the household for the last twenty years had been due in part to his knowing the time to yield, a knowledge that would have prolonged the sway of many a despot.

He went up-stairs in a rebellious mood which found expression in invectives against womankind, its blindness, its wilfulness, its weak subservience to usage. But when he appeared at the breakfast table, the conventional shirt and trousers testified to the extent of Persis' authority.

Little was said during the progress of the meal. Joel, saddened by the lack of enthusiasm with which his great discovery had been received, maintained a dignified silence. Persis, always moved to magnanimity by triumph, forbore to emphasize her victory by obtruding on her brother's reserve. Not till Joel had been fortified by a hearty breakfast and had reached the advertising columns in his perusal of the weekly paper, did she venture to touch upon another delicate theme.

"Joel, I wish you'd open the shutters of your bedroom and run up the shade to the top. If ever a room needed airing and sunning, that's the one. I'm going to give it a good cleaning as soon as I can take the time, but this morning I'm too busy. Annabel Sinclair's coming for a fitting at ten o'clock and that young Mis' Thompson at eleven. And I'm as sure as I can be of anything but death and taxes, that Annabel will be late."

Persis' apprehension would have taken on a keener

edge, could she have been favored at that moment with a glimpse of the patron of whose punctuality she was in doubt. Ever since eight o'clock, Diantha Sinclair had been opening the door of her mother's room at intervals of five minutes and closing the same noiselessly, after a brief survey of the figure on the bed. As the tenantry of field and forest apprehend the approach of some natural cataclysm, by means of signs imperceptible to man's grosser senses, so to Diantha the curve of her mother's shoulder under the sheet, presaged a storm. Her uneasiness was due to a horrid uncertainty as to which would anger her mother the more, to be wakened too early or to be allowed to sleep too long.

By nine o'clock, the second of the alternatives seemed to Diantha the more serious. She stole into her mother's room, and stationing herself by the bed, spoke in the softest of voices: "Mama, your new dress—"

The opening showed a tact creditable to her years. After all, it is one thing to be wakened by the crashing of a boarding-house breakfast gong, and another to be roused by the music of a harp. Annabel opened her eyes with a sense of something agreeable on the way, and Diantha promptly acted on her advantage.

"Mama, you are to try on your new dress at ten o'clock, and it's nine already."

"Nine!" moaned Annabel. "You should have called me before." Yet she made no effort to rise and after a moment added sharply: "What are you waiting for? Can't you see I'm awake?"

Diantha scurried like a rabbit, and her mother turned on her pillow for another half-hour, an indulgence she would not have ventured under her daughter's observant eyes. Like many people who defy public opinion in large matters, she was acutely sensitive to criticism over trifles. Aspersions of her character she accepted philosophically, almost complacently indeed, because of her inward conviction that they were indirectly a tribute paid by jealousy to her superior fascinations. But a suggestion that a dress was unbecoming would make her unhappy for days.

Her first act on rising was to run up the shade, in order to benefit by the full light of the morning sun. Then for some minutes she studied her reflection in a little hand-mirror which gave back to her view a face rapt and absorbed. With Annabel this rite was a substitute for morning prayer, and it brought her a peace not always secured by equally sincere devotions. Diantha's willowy height woke

in her a sense of exasperated fear. It sometimes seemed to her that the girl's growth was with deliberate purpose, a malicious demonstration of the fact that her mother was not so young as she looked.

The testimony of the hand-mirror was reassuring, clear pink and white, the crisp freshness of apple blossoms. Annabel worshiped and rose from her knees, duly fortified against the mischances of the day, though her divinity had been only her own beauty.

At nineteen, Annabel had married a man twenty years her senior, who like many of his sex assumed that a pretty wife is from the Lord and associated amiability, compliance and other feminine graces with a rose-leaf complexion. The earlier years of their married life had been a succession of ghastly struggles in which both sides had been worsted, descending to incredible brutalities. Sinclair was essentially a gentleman, and long after those contentious years he sometimes woke from his sleep in a cold sweat, remembering what he had said to his wife and she to him. Her unwelcome motherhood had only widened the breach between them. Her hysterically fierce resentment of that which he had innocently assumed to be a woman's crowning happiness, had extinguished finally the last gleaming

embers of a flame which might have been altar fire and hearth fire both in one.

The man's growing apathy at length gave the victory to the woman. If he did not hate his wife, Stanley Sinclair was so far from loving her that his thin lips curled mockingly over the recollection of what he had hoped on his wedding-day. If there is pathos in the lost illusions of youth, those of middle life are grim tragedy. Sinclair wanted peace at any price. The masculine intolerance of rivalry was less insistent than it would have been in a younger man. Out of the wreck of things he asked to save only quiet and the chance to live a gentleman. His wife might go her way, so that she showed him a serene face and treated him with tolerable courtesy. And so tacitly the two made the Great Compromise.

At fifty-seven Stanley Sinclair was a cynically cheerful philosopher. He had long before discovered that technically his rights as a husband were safe. The woman whose vanity is stronger than her affections is shielded by triple armor, and 'Annabel's virtue was safe, at least while her complexion lasted. She was a glutton of admiration, and since the highest homage a man could pay her charms was to fall in love with her, she bent her energies unweariedly to bringing him to the point

of candid love-making. With success, her interest waned. A lover might last six months or even a year, but as a rule he was displaced in considerably less time by some understudy whom Annabel had thoughtfully kept in training for the star rôle.

In Annabel's creed, masculine admiration was the supreme good. It was the ultimate test of a woman's success, as the ability to make money tested the success of men. Beauty was precious, because it was the most effective lure. Talent was not to be despised, since it too could boast its captives. But the woman who claimed that she prized her gift for its own sake was guilty of an affectation which could deceive no one, not at least, so shrewd an observer as Annabel.

At nineteen she had married a man more than twice her age. Since then her preference for youthfulness had been growing, a phenomenon not unusual in women of her type. At thirty-seven, she looked upon her husband as senile, patriarchal, as far removed from her generation as the Pilgrim fathers. Men of her own age bored her. They were interested in business, politics, their families, a thousand things besides herself. They had lost the obsession of personality, the you-and-I attitude which is the life-blood of flirtation.

Just now Annabel preferred boys still young enough to be secretly proud of the necessity of shaving every other day, young enough to swagger a little when they lighted a cigarette. At her present rate of progress, by the time she was fifty, she would have come by successive gradations to the level of short trousers and turn-over collars.

The average worshiper may hurry over his prayers, but the devotee of vanity must not make haste with her toilet. It was quarter of eleven when Annabel was dressed, but since the results were satisfactory, she was untroubled over her lack of punctuality. It was Diantha who fidgeted, and looked at the clock.

"You're 'most an hour behind time. You'd better hurry if you don't want Miss Persis to scold."

"I shan't hurry for any one," Annabel returned, selecting after due deliberation the parasol with the pink lining. Her husband was lounging on the porch as she went out, and he greeted her with his usual, "Good morning, my dear," his gaze following her with the gently satiric smile which always made her feverishly impatient to consult the little mirror she carried in her hand-bag. That smile hinted at extraordinary insight and unnerved her as his

frenzied outbursts of anger had never done. She had lost her power to hurt him except in the way of humiliation, but he cynically argued that the constant amusement she afforded him almost paid this last indebtedness. It was like having a season ticket to a theater.

Persis Dale was fitting young Mrs. Thompson, the traveling man's wife, when Annabel made her appearance. She nodded, glad that the half dozen pins held loosely between her lips, relieved her from the obligation of a welcoming smile.

"Maybe you'd like to set on the porch, Mis' Sinclair, till I'm at liberty. Your hour was ten, you know. It's shady out there and you can look over the new books. And now, Mis' Thompson, before I go any further we've got to decide whether it's to open in the front or in the back."

"I think the buttons down the back are more stylish," said young Mrs. Thompson.

"There's no doubt of that," Persis agreed. "Everything in the book is back. But there's always more'n one way to skin a cat. I could put a row of hooks under the lace, around this side of the yoke, and nobody'd ever know where it was fastened, or whether you were just run into it."

Young Mrs. Thompson hesitated, studying herself

in the mirror. Persis employed several pins in tightening a seam and expressed her views at some length.

"It's just this way, Mis' Thompson. If you had a nice little girl, big enough to stand on a chair and fasten you up the back, I wouldn't say a word against it. But of all things that rack your nerves and spoil your temper, twisting and squirming and trying to reach three or four buttons, first from above and then from below, is certainly the limit. And putting a shawl over your shoulders on a hot day and going to find some neighbor to do it for you, ain't a great deal better."

"But this is going to be my Sunday dress," said the six-months bride, whose color had increased appreciably during the course of Persis' remarks. "And Will is always home for Sunday."

"Well, if you feel like taking the risk, Mis' Thompson, I haven't a word to say. But when a man's home for a Sunday rest, he generally wants a rest, and dresses that button up the back don't seem to fit in with the idea. Human nature can't stand only just so much and man nature considerable less."

An undecided murmur escaped the lips of young Mrs. Thompson.

"I had a customer," continued Persis, recklessly filling her mouth with pins, "who gave up a good position as cashier in a city glove store, to keep house for her brother when his wife died. She was always telling me how grateful he was. Seemed like he couldn't do enough for her. She used to say it 'most made her uncomfortable to see that man racking his brains to find some way of showing her how he appreciated what she'd done for him. Please walk to the end of the room, Mis' Thompson, slow and graceful, till I see how that skirt hangs. Just a trifle long on the seam. I thought so.

"Well, I made her a princess dress; gray it was and very stylish. It hooked down the back, and then there was a drapery effect that hooked up the side and across the shoulder. I wouldn't dare say how many cards of hooks and eyes I used on that dress. I did ask her once how she'd get into it, and she said that her brother, what with having been married and all, was as handy as a woman at such things.

"I sent it home of a Saturday, and I didn't see her for two weeks. Then she brought it in and she was crying. She wanted me to fix it some way so that she could get into it by herself. Easier said

than done, you can believe. She'd worn it twice, and both times they'd had words, and some of 'em were swear words, too. Well, I did the best I could by the dress, but it was too late to save the day. You see she'd taken such comfort in thinking how grateful he was, that she hadn't minded what she'd given up herself, but after that, things was different. She went back to the city in less than a year. I think she's a cashier in some restaurant. She couldn't get her old place in the glove store."

Young Mrs. Thompson had a bright idea. "Couldn't you put a row of buttons down the back, just for looks, and then hook it under the lace, same as you said?"

"Easiest thing in the world," Persis assured her. The domestic peace of the Thompson family was preserved for the time being, though neither woman guessed for how brief a period.

Annabel Sinclair was thoroughly out of temper when the time for her fitting came, though she paid Persis the compliment of making a whole-hearted effort to conceal her feelings. Persis Dale was one of the few of whom Annabel stood in awe. Behind her back she frequently referred to the dressmaker as an "interfering old maid," but in Persis' presence she paid reluctant tribute to the dominating person-

ality. When very angry, Annabel indulged in whatever brutalities of plain speech were suggested by a somewhat limited imagination, but her habitual weapon was innuendo. She shrank from Persis' bluntness as a dog cringes away from a whip.

When young Mrs. Thompson had hurried off to the brand-new cottage on the hill, Annabel concealed her annoyance under a smile, inquired after Joel's health and yielded to Persis' opinion with flattering deference. But Persis' mood was not merciful.

"How your Diantha is growing, Mis' Sinclair. She must have left you way behind before this."

Annabel winced. She had long been in the habit of referring to Diantha as "my little girl." Of late she had fancied that her listeners looked amused at her choice of a qualifying adjective.

"It's such a pity," she answered in her softest voice, "for a child to grow that way. People expect so much more of tall children."

"Well, girls often get their growth by the time they're Diantha's age. Let's see. She must be six—"

"I believe that seam twists," Annabel exclaimed. She chose her criticism at random with the sole purpose of distracting Persis' attention before the obnoxious word should be spoken. Yet it was true

that she had been married eighteen years. In another seven she would be able to celebrate her silver wedding, an anniversary she had always associated with old age. The horror of the situation was not lessened by its grotesqueness.

"The worst of it is that everybody in this dreadful little town knows all about it," she thought with a sense of panic. "People haven't anything to do but remember dates." She wondered if she could prevail upon her husband to go west, leaving Diantha in school somewhere. Then she could say what she chose of her "little girl" without appealing to the risibilities of her audience.

Persis, distracted for a moment by the false alarm of a twisting seam, soon returned to her guns. With a skill Annabel was forced to admire, she veiled her cruelty in compliment.

"Diantha is a pretty girl. Pretty and clever with her tongue. An apple's got to have flavor as well as a rosy skin. There'll be lively times at your place before long. It'll make you and Mr. Sinclair feel young again to have courting going on in the house."

If murderous thoughts were as potent as daggers, Persis would never have fitted another gown. Annabel was reaching the point where self-control was

difficult. Young again! Again! Even her reflection in the mirror and the knowledge that the new dress was becoming, failed to restore her equanimity.

Yet in the end it was Annabel who scored. For when at length she crossed Persis' threshold, a young man happened to be passing. A ravishing smile banished Annabel's look of sullen resentment. Her white-gloved hand fluttered in greeting.

The young fellow swung upon his heel, his boyish face flushing in undisguised rapture. He waited till Annabel reached the sidewalk, took the pink-lined parasol from her hand with an air of proud possession, and the two walked away together.

From the window Persis looked grimly after them. "Make the most of this chance," she apostrophized the pair. "I'm getting ready to take your case in hand."

CHAPTER IV

THE WOMAN'S CLUB

PERSIS DALE was under no misapprehension, regarding her standing in the community. She fully appreciated the fact that she was a pillar of Clematis society and would have accepted as her due the complimentary implication of Mrs. Warren's post-card, even if its duplicates had not offered a similar tribute to at least thirty of her acquaintances. The invitations were all written in Mrs. Warren's near-Spencerian hand, the *t's* expanding blottily at the tips, the curves of the capitals suggesting in their sudden murky expansion, the Mississippi River after its union with the muddy Missouri.

"As one of the representative women of Clematis, you are invited to attend a meeting at the home of Mrs. Sophia Warren, Saturday the 12th inst. at 2 P. M. Object of meeting, the organization of a Woman's Club for the purpose of expanding the horizon of the individual members and uplifting the community as a whole. Please be prompt."

The arrival of the postman while Persis was busy with a fitting, gave Joel time to examine the mail and frame a withering denunciation of Mrs. Warren's plan. He sprung the same upon his sister with pyrotechnic effect a little later.

"A woman's club! Clematis *is* getting on. Pretty soon the women'll be smoking cigarettes and wanting to run for mayor and letting their own rightful sphere go to the everlasting bow-wows. Expand their horizons! What's the good of a horizon to a woman who's got a house to look after, and a man around to do her thinking for her? If women folks nowadays worked as hard as their grandmothers did, we wouldn't hear any of this nonsense about clubs. As good old Doctor Watts says:

> " 'For Satan finds some mischief still
> For idle hands to do.' "

Persis, arranging a cascade of lace, over the voluptuous bosom of her adjustable bust-form, stood back to get the effect. "Maybe you're right, Joel," she acknowledged placidly, "but I'm going to that meeting at Sophia Warren's Saturday if I have to sew all Friday night to get my week's work out of the way."

In the face of masculine scoffs, which sometimes,

as in Joel's case, became denunciatory rather than humorous, about twenty of the representative thirty Mrs. Warren had called from her list of acquaintances, accepted the invitation and were on hand at the hour designated. The opposition of sundry husbands and fathers, as well as of those unattached males who disapproved of women's clubs on general principles, had lent to the project the seductive flavor of forbidden fruit. The women who donned their Sunday best that Saturday afternoon had an exhilarating sense of adventure. Even Annabel Sinclair, invariably bored by the society of her own sex, made her appearance with the others and from her post of observation in the corner, noted the effect of lavender on Gladys Wells' complexion, and wondered why Thad West's mother didn't try anti-fat.

As the clock struck two, Mrs. Warren rose with a Jack-in-the-box effect from behind the table where she had ensconced herself after welcoming the last arrival. Mrs. Warren had taught school before her marriage and under the stimulus of her present responsibility, her voice and manner reverted to their earlier pedagogical precision. As she rapped the assembly to order, she had every appearance of a teacher calling on the A-class to recite.

"Ladies, I am glad to see so many of you punctual. Miss Persis Dale has sent word that she will be detained for a little by the pressure of Saturday's work, but that she will join us later, and undoubtedly other tardy arrivals will have excuses equally good. And now, ladies, the first business of the afternoon will be the election of a chairman."

"Oh, you've got to be chairman," observed Mrs. West conversationally from the largest armchair. "None of the rest of us know enough." Corroborative nods and murmurs approved the suggestion, and Mrs. Warren acknowledged the compliment by a prim little bow.

"Do I understand you to make this in the form of a motion, Mrs. West?"

"Why, ye-es, I s'pose so," returned Mrs. West, visibly startled by the suggestion that she had performed that feat without a realizing sense of its momentous character.

"Is there a second to this motion?"

The chilling silence, which the first hint of parliamentary procedure imposes on the most voluble gathering, unaccustomed to its technicalities, was broken at length, by the voice of Susan Fitzgerald, who said faintly, "I do," and blushed to the roots of her hair.

"You have heard the motion, ladies. All in favor signify it, by saying *aye*."

Twenty voices in unison gave an effect at once businesslike and harmonious; and the representative women of Clematis looked vaguely pleased to find their end so easily attained.

"Contrary-minded, the same sign." A breathless pause while the assembly waited for the daring opposition to manifest itself. "The motion appears to be carried, carried unanimously, ladies. I thank you for your confidence. We shall now proceed to consider the best method of organizing ourselves so as to expand the horizon of the individual members"— Mrs. Warren was quoting, unabashed, from her own post-card—"in addition to uplifting the community as a whole."

The chairman went into temporary eclipse by taking her seat, and the gathering no longer frozen into speechlessness by the realization that there was a motion before the house, rippled out in brook-like fluency.

"I think a card club would be just too grand for anything," gushed Gladys Wells with an effect of girlishness, quite misleading. "My cousin in Springfield belongs to a card club, and they have just the grandest times. Everybody pays ten cents each

meeting, and that goes for the prize. My cousin won a perfectly grand cut-glass butter dish."

"I don't see how parlor gambling would help uplift the community," commented Mrs. Richards coldly from the opposite side of the room.

The seemingly inevitable clash was averted by Susan Fitzgerald, who rose and addressed the chair, a feat of such reckless daring as to reduce the assembly to instant dumbness.

"Mrs. President, I think a suffrage club is what we need in Clematis 'most of anything. We women have submitted to being downtrodden long enough, and the only way for us to force men to give us our rights is to organize and stand shoulder to shoulder. It's time for us to arise—to arise in our might and defy the oppressor."

Susan subsided, mopping her moist forehead as if her oratorical effort had occupied an hour, rather than a trifle over thirty seconds. Gradually the meeting recovered from its temporary paralysis.

"If it's going to be that sort of a club, I'm sure Robert wouldn't approve of my having anything to do with it," Mrs. Hornblower remarked with great distinctness, though apparently addressing her remarks to her right-hand neighbor. "Robert isn't what you'd call a tyrant, but he believes that a man

ought to be master in his own house. If he thought there was any danger of my getting interested in such subjects, he'd put his foot right down and that would be the end of it."

The ghost of a titter swept over the gathering. Mrs. Hornblower, though fond of flaunting her wifely subjection in the faces of her acquaintances, never failed to get her own way in any domestic crisis where she had taken the trouble to form a preference. And on the other hand, poor Susan Fitzgerald, for all her blustering defiance of the tyrant sex, could in reality be overawed and browbeaten by any male not yet out of kilts. Before the phantom-like laughter had quite died away, Mrs. Hornblower added majestically: "But I don't want my opinions to count too much either way as I may be leaving Clematis before long."

The expansion of the horizon of the representative women of Clematis, with the incidental uplift of the community, was immediately relegated to the background of interest. "Leaving Clematis!" exclaimed a dozen voices, the accent of shocked protest easily perceptible above mere surprise and curiosity.

Mrs. Hornblower, in her evident enjoyment of

the sensation of which she was the center, was in no hurry to explain.

"We're thinking of selling the farm and investing in an apple orchard," she announced at length. "Robert's worked hard all his life, and we think it's about time he began to take things easy. The comp'ny undertakes to do all the work of taking care of the orchard and marketing the fruit for a quarter of our net profits, and that'll leave me and Robert free to travel 'round and enjoy ourselves. We're looking over plans now for our villa."

Even Annabel Sinclair straightened herself suddenly, galvanized into closer attention by that magic word.

"I've heard tell that there was lots of money in apples," exclaimed Mrs. West. "But I didn't s'pose there was enough so that folks wouldn't need to do any work to get it out."

"You see, people in general don't appreciate what science and system can do," patronizingly explained Mrs. Hornblower. "If you'd read some of the literature the Apple of Eden Investment Comp'ny sends us, it would be an eye-opener."

"Ladies, ladies!" expostulated the chairman, "we are forgetting the object of our meeting." Then

temporarily setting aside her official duties in favor of her responsibility as hostess, she hurried forward to greet a new arrival. "So glad to see you, Mrs. Leveridge. But I'm sorry you couldn't persuade young Mrs. Thompson to accompany you."

"She'd agreed to come," replied Mrs. Leveridge, loosening her bonnet-strings and sighing. "But at the last minute she found it wasn't possible."

The room rustled expectantly. There is always a chance that the reason for a bride's regrets may be of interest.

"Nothing serious, I hope," said Mrs. West insinuatingly.

Mrs. Leveridge's sigh was provocative of further questions.

"Well, no, and then again, yes. It isn't anything like a death in the family. But you don't have to live long to find out that death ain't the worst thing."

"My goodness, Minerva," exclaimed Susan Fitzgerald, aghast. "What's happened?"

Mrs. Leveridge's deliberative gaze swept the silently expectant company.

"Of course, I wouldn't repeat it everywhere. But I'm sure anything I say won't go a step further."

Twenty voices replied, "Of course not," with a

unanimity which gave it the effect of a congregational response in the litany.

Mrs. Leveridge, having made terms with her conscience, from all appearances rather enjoyed the responsibility of enlightening her audience. "It's her husband."

"Her husband!" cried Susan Fitzgerald protestingly; "why, she hasn't been married six months."

Mrs. Leveridge's smile showed more than a tinge of patronage.

"If you'd ever been married yourself, Susan, you'd know that six months was enough, quite enough. If he's that kind of a man, six weeks is about as long as he can keep on his good behavior."

"He hasn't been beating her, has he?" asked Mrs. Hornblower, her voice dropping to a thrilled whisper.

"No, I'd call it worse than that, myself. You see when I stopped for Mis' Thompson, on my way here, I found her crying and taking on something terrible. She had a letter in her hand, and of course I s'posed it had brought some bad news that was working her up, and I begged her to tell me about it so's to ease her mind, you understand.

"Well, she kept on moaning and crying, and at last it all came out. It seems that when she went

to the closet to get down her jacket, a coat of her husband's fell off the hanger. The pockets was stuffed with letters, the shiftless way men-folks have, and they went sprawling all over the floor. She picked up this among the rest. It was addressed to W. Thompson, at some hotel in Cleveland, and it had been forwarded to the city office of his firm. And seeing it was a dashing sort of writing that stretched clear across the envelope, and didn't look a mite like business, she was curious to know what it was about."

"Now, don't tell me there was anything bad in that letter," implored Mrs. West. "I always thought young Mr. Thompson had such a nice face."

"Well, if handsome is that handsome does, he hasn't any more looks to boast of than a striped snake. It was a letter from a girl, a regular love-letter from start to finish. It opened up with 'Tommy Darling.'"

"But young Mr. Thompson's name is Wilbur," somebody objected.

"I guess the Tommy was pet for Thompson. The envelope was directed to W. Thompson and you can't squeeze a Tommy out of a W. no matter how hard you try. The girl, whoever she is, has gone into it with her eyes open. Two or three times she

dropped little hints about his wife. Didn't say *wife* right out, you know. It was kind of veiled, but you couldn't help understanding."

"Was there any name signed?" asked Annabel Sinclair, opening her lips for the first time that afternoon. She herself had long before realized the unadvisability of signing one's name to one's epistolary efforts.

"'Twas just signed 'Enid.' There was a monogram on the paper, but I couldn't make it out. Seems as if you could find 'most any letter in a monogram. The paper was nice and heavy and all scented up. Poor Mis' Thompson!"

"She ought to leave him," exploded Susan Fitzgerald. "And I shouldn't blame her a mite if she poisoned his coffee first. If women could vote, they'd send a man like that to the gallows."

Mrs. West championed the absent sex. "In a case of that sort, Susan, you can't put all the blame off on to the man. There's a woman in it, too, every time, and the one's as deep in the mud as the other is in the mire. And like as not," continued Mrs. West, a tell-tale tension in her voice, "he was a nice, clean-minded young man when she came along, making eyes at him, like a snake charming a sparrow. I'm not crazy about voting, but if I had the

ballot, I'd vote for locking up those kind of women and keeping every last one of 'em at hard labor for the term of their natural lives."

The moment was electric, and Mrs. Warren hastily proffered her services as a lightning-rod. "Is she going to leave him, do you think?"

"Well, I guess she's got a crazy notion in her head that maybe he can explain. I tried to talk her out of that idea. As I said to her, a man capable of anything of that sort won't stop at lying out of it. And I should judge," concluded Mrs. Leveridge, "that that young Mr. Thompson would be capable of a real convincing lie. He don't look wicked, but he does look smart."

The outer door opened and closed with an impetus just short of a slam, irresistibly suggestive in some obscure fashion, of the entrance of ardent youth. "I didn't think 'twas worth while to ring," explained Persis Dale, nodding to the right and left as she advanced to greet her hostess. "Sorry to be so late. I guess you've got everything pretty nearly settled by now." She bowed rather stiffly to Annabel Sinclair, sitting silent in her corner, and acknowledged with reluctant admiration that the woman certainly was a credit to her dressmaker.

A guilty constraint settled upon the gathering so

fluent a moment before, and psychologically considered, there was food for reflection in the sudden embarrassed silence. These good women were far from being vulgar gossips with one or two possible exceptions. They were shocked at this unanticipated revelation of human perfidy. The young wife, humiliated and heart-broken before the morning glow of romance had faded from her marriage, had their profoundest sympathy. Yet when the curtain rises on a human drama, however tragic its development, the little thrill that runs over the audience is not altogether unpleasant. Regrettable as it is that Othello should smother his wife, there seems a certain gratification in making ourselves familiar with the details of the operation. It was the consciousness of this unacknowledged satisfaction which rendered Mrs. Warren's guests abashed at Persis' advent, like children discovered in some forbidden pastime. They avoided one another's eyes, assuming an expression of grave absorption, whose obvious implication was that the uplifting of the community was the matter most in their thought.

With all her interest in other people's affairs, the personality of Persis Dale was as a killing frost to many a flourishing scandal. She had a readiness to believe the best, a reluctance to condemn her fel-

low men on anything short of convincing proof, fatal to calumny. Although perhaps justified in thinking the worst of young Mr. Thompson, no one present felt disposed to enlighten Persis as to the character of the discussion which had engrossed a gathering convened for the high moral purposes outlined on Mrs. Warren's post-card.

"I—we—well, we have not reached any conclusion as yet," explained the chairman of the meeting, with a notable accession of color. "Several suggestions have been made, however, and we hope you will have something to add."

Persis would not have been Persis had she failed to have something to suggest. Whether her businesslike methods aided in bringing matters to a focus, or whether the change was due to a conscience-stricken reaction on the part of the representative women of Clematis, it is certain that the deliberations of the body were not again sidetracked by the intrusion of personal matters. The business of the afternoon was transacted with a rapidity putting to shame some more pretentious conventions, the women wisely refusing to be hampered or restricted by the tangles of parliamentary law, in which, as every one knows, much really important legislation is strangled.

When the meeting adjourned at quarter of six, an hour which sent prudent housewives scurrying homeward, Mrs. Sophia Warren was the duly elected president of the Clematis Woman's Club, while Susan Fitzgerald had accepted the duties of secretary of the organization. The members had voted to meet weekly, taking up the study of English literature, and current events, the two subjects to divide the program equally. The club was to hold itself in readiness to grapple with questions of civic improvement, and already a committee had been appointed to arrange for a Harvest Home Festival at the county almshouse for the edification of the inmates. It really began to look as if the horizon of a number of people would be enlarged and the community as a whole uplifted, with or without its consent.

CHAPTER V.

DIANTHA GROWS UP

NOW that Annabel Sinclair had no immediate use for Persis' services, Diantha's wardrobe could receive attention. The girl presented herself at the dressmaker's late one afternoon, her smooth forehead disfigured by an irritated frown, her mouth resolutely unsmiling. Under one arm she carried a roll of cheap white lawn. Annabel frequently commented on the uselessness of buying expensive materials for a girl who grew as rapidly as Diantha, though the reasonableness of this contention was slightly discounted by her recognized ability to demonstrate that the cream of things was invariably her portion, while an all-wise Providence had obviously designed the skimmed milk for the rest of the world.

Her eyes upon the girl's averted face, Persis measured off the coarse stuff, using her arm as a yard-stick. "Hm! Even with skirts as skimpy as they are now, this won't be enough by a yard

and a half. Better call it two yards. It's high time your skirts were coming down where they belong. You can't stay a little girl forever."

Some magic had erased the fretful pucker between Diantha's brows. The grim ungirlish compression of her lips softened into angelic mildness. As she turned upon Persis, she looked an older sister of the Sistine cherubs.

"How long—about how long do you think it had better be, Miss Persis?"

"I should say"—Persis looked her over with an impersonal air, lending weight to the resulting judgment—"I should say about to your shoe-tops."

Had she guessed the consequences of such an expression of opinion, she might have modified her verdict or at least held it in reserve. A tempest swept the room. Persis was seized, whirled this way and then that, hugged, kissed, forced to join in a delirious two-step. With scarcely breath to protest, powerless in the grip of the storm she had herself evoked, she finally came to anchor between the secretary and the armchair, Diantha still holding her fast.

"Shoe-tops! You *did* say shoe-tops, didn't you, darling Miss Persis?"

"Yes, I said shoe-tops, and I'm glad I didn't say

a train. A real long dress would have been the death of me, it's more'n likely. For all you're as tall as Jack's bean-stalk, Diantha Sinclair, you're not grown up yet."

Persis freed herself, smiling ruefully as she arranged her disordered hair. The delicious girlishness of the outburst in which she had involuntarily participated had the effect of challenging her own obstinate sense of being on the threshold of things, and making her wonder if perhaps she were not growing old. That the passing shadow on her face failed to attract Diantha's attention was due less to lack of insight than to youth's cheerfully selfish absorption in its own problems. "May I pick out the style from the grown-up part of the fashion books?" was the girl's breathless question.

"It's got to be simple," Persis warned her sternly. Then softening: "But good land! Grandmothers nowadays are wearing simple little girlish things with ribbon bows in the back. Pick out what you want. Everything in this month's book is just about right for sixteen."

As Diantha gave herself to rapturous study of the fashion-plates, Persis studied her. "She's in a fair way to make a beauty. Annabel at her best never held a candle to what this girl is likely to turn out.

Annabel's looks are skin deep. Diantha's have top-roots running to her brain and her heart, too. Only she ought to be happier. 'Most any girl face is pretty to look at if it's happy enough, same as 'most any flower is pretty if it grows in the sun."

A harassing reflection troubled Diantha's bliss. "Miss Persis, I haven't got a petticoat that comes below my knees."

"I'll make you a petticoat the same length as the dress. That's always the best way. A skirt that's too long looks as if you wanted to show the lace, and one's that too short looks as if you were trying to save on cotton cloth, and I don't know which is worse." To herself Persis added: "If she went home and asked her mother for a long petticoat, the fat would all be in the fire."

For a woman at least as conscientious as the average of her sex, Persis was singularly unmindful of the enormity of encouraging a daughter to act in defiance of her mother's wishes. Had she been called upon to defend herself, she might have explained that she had small respect for the authority of a motherhood which had never progressed beyond the physical relationship. Annabel, a reluctant mother in the beginning, had been consistently selfish ever since, and Persis gave scant

recognition to parental rights that were not the outgrowth of parental love. Moreover, the project she had in mind was of too complex importance for her to allow it to be side-tracked by petty scruples.

"Like enough she'll refuse to pay my bill," thought Persis, with a grim smile, as she watched Diantha turning the gaily colored plates like a butterfly fluttering from blossom to blossom. "I guess she won't go as far as that though, as long as there ain't another dressmaker in Clematis she'd trust to make her a kimono. If she says anything, that'll pave the way for me to give her a good plain talking to, and even if I never get a cent for the dress, I might as well give my missionary money that way as any other."

The rush of the season—Clematis is sufficiently sophisticated to know in what months propriety demands overworking one's dressmaker and milliner —was already over, and the little frock made rapid progress. Cheap and plain and simple as it was, its effect upon the wearer, even in its stages of incompleteness, was so striking that Persis sometimes forgot her official duty in the satisfaction of a long admiring stare. And probably in her sixteen years of existence, Diantha had never so nearly approximated all the cardinal virtues as in that idyllic week.

She besieged Persis with offers of assistance, pleading for permission to pull basting threads or overcast seams. At home she was gentle, yielding, subdued. Her father, having learned through bitter experience how open to the attack of a million miseries love makes the heart, had resolved that fate should not again trick him. He had steeled himself against the appeal of Diantha's babyhood and had watched unmoved her precocious development. The mocking politeness which characterized his manner toward his wife was replaced in the case of the daughter by a distant formality. Yet now as Diantha went about the house with dreamy eyes and a half smile on her lips, there were times when the father looked at her almost wistfully and wondered of what she were thinking. With all due respect to the human will, we must acknowledge ourselves creatures of circumstance in no little degree, when two yards of lawn, retailing at twelve and a half cents, can prove so potent a factor in character and destiny.

Diantha's mother might have prescribed quinine had she noted anything unusual in the girl's demeanor. But Annabel had reached a crucial stage in her flirtation with Thad West. The boy was developing a gratifying jealousy of the tenor singer in

the Unitarian church choir and must be treated with a nice commingling of indulgence and severity to prevent his asserting himself in the crude masculine fashion, and either terminating the intimacy or else permanently getting the upper hand. Annabel was enjoying the crisis of the game and found it impossible to spare from her own absorbing interests a thought for such a minor consideration as Diantha's moods.

Diantha anticipated the time when she was to call for her finished frock by more than an hour. "I know you're not ready yet," she apologized, as Persis looked at the clock. "But I thought I'd like to watch you work, if you don't mind."

"Of course I don't mind, child. Just put those fashion books on the table and take the easy chair." Persis bent over the finishings of the little frock with a vague satisfaction in the nearness of the motionless figure. She was growing fond of Diantha, a not unnatural result of the adoring attention Diantha had lavished upon her for a week past. But because Persis was a woman with a living to make, and Diantha was a girl with a dream to be dreamed, scarcely a word was spoken till the last stitch was taken.

"There!" Persis removed a basting thread with

a jerk, making an unsuccessful pretense that the finishing of this dress was like the completion of any other piece of work. "There! It's done at last. I suppose you'll want to try it on."

"Yes," said Diantha, "I'll try it on." And as the faded blue serge slipped from her shoulders to be replaced by the white lawn, the Diantha who had been, took her departure to that remote country from which the children never come back.

Persis was almost appalled by the result for which she was principally responsible. The tall Diantha in a dress to her shoe-tops was disconcertingly unlike the little girl she had known. She looked older than her years, stately, self-contained and beautiful. It was not till Persis had fortified herself by the reflection that she might as well be hung for an old sheep as for a lamb, that she ventured another revolutionary suggestion.

"Diantha, I s'pose you'll make some change in the way you do your hair?"

"Yes, indeed." Diantha, scrutinizing herself in the mirror, frowned at the drooping curls with an air of restrained disgust. "This way is only suitable for children."

Persis' negligent gesture called attention to the open door of the bedroom. "There's a box of hair-

pins on the dresser. If you like, you can fix yourself up and surprise your mother."

Diantha vanished swiftly. She had no illusions regarding the nature of the coming surprise. Her mother would be very angry, but the sooner that storm had spent itself, the better. Relentlessly the golden curls were sacrificed to the impressive coiffure of the woman of fashion. For a novice Diantha was remarkably deft, her skill suggesting periods of anticipatory practise with her door locked and no eyes but her own to admire the effect.

During the progress of this rite, Persis in the adjoining room, looked at the clock, glanced at the window and then paced the floor, for once in her well-disciplined life too nervous to utilize the flying moments. Persis was in the dilemma of a stage manager whose curtain is ready to go up, and whose *prima donna* is about to appear, while the audience has failed to materialize. To such mischances does one subject one's self in assuming the responsibilities of a deputy-providence.

Then her brow cleared, even while her heart jumped into her throat. The gate clicked, and a lithe figure swung up the path. Persis took her time in answering the peremptory knock.

"Good afternoon, Miss Persis. Mother said that you—"

"Walk in, Thad. Yes, I've a little package to send your mother. Sit down while I look for it."

Would the girl never come! The curtain was rung up, the audience waiting. But the stage was empty. How long a time in Heaven's name did Diantha expect to spend in combing her hair. "I should think she was waiting for it to grow," thought the harassed Persis. Very deliberately she opened and closed every drawer in the old-fashioned secretary, though she knew the upper contained only old letters and the second, garden seeds.

Thad was fidgeting. "If you can't put your hand on it, Miss Persis, don't bother to hunt. I'll drop in again in a day or two."

"Just a minute, Thad. It must be right around here. It can't—ah!" Persis forgot the ending of the unnecessary sentence. For now Thad West was at liberty to leave whenever he pleased.

A tall slender figure advanced into the room. Diantha's grace had always made her an anomaly among tall children. Her hair was parted and drawn back simply, after the fashion doubtless designed by earth's beauties, since it is the despair of

plain women. The yellow curls, sacrificing their individual distinction, had magnanimously contributed to the perfection of the exquisite golden coil at the back of her shapely head. No one would have looked twice at the plain little lawn, but it proved superior to some more pretentious gowns in that it set off the charms of the wearer, instead of distracting attention from them. The unlooked-for apparition brought Thad West to his feet, and so Youth and Beauty met as if hitherto they had been strangers.

For a long half minute they stood without speaking. "Oh, good afternoon," Diantha said at last, and veiled her eyes from his fascinated stare. Formerly she had treated him with the free-and-easy pertness of a precocious child. Now the exquisite shyness of maidenhood enveloped her. Instinct drew her back from the man's inevitable advance. "I didn't know it was so late," she said to Persis, oblivious to Thad's gasping greeting. "I must hurry."

Thad's sense of confusion was like a physical dizziness. This regal young beauty was the daughter of the woman whose hand he had held surreptitiously the previous evening. With an effort he steadied himself, only to make the discovery that in that hazy moment the world had undergone a

process of readjustment. He knew as well as he was ever to know it, that Annabel Sinclair belonged to another generation from his own.

"I suppose you want to take this along." Persis' gesture indicated the package containing the discarded serge which Diantha would have been glad to contribute to the wardrobe of the youthful Trotters. But with all her daring, her courage was hardly equal to such a step. She put out her hand for the package, but Thad had already pounced upon it.

"I—I'm going your way," he said, a trace of his recent disorder in his stammering speech. "I'll carry it for you."

Silently Diantha accepted the offer. She kissed Persis good-by in a fashion which the critical might have pronounced needlessly provocative, though her dreamy eyes protested that nothing was further from her maiden thoughts than the presence of Thad West. Persis, who was intensely alive to every phase of the dramatic situation, had caught a glimpse of the young fellow's face during the affectionate leave-taking and was abundantly satisfied.

"Thad's no fool, though he's acted like the twin brother to an idiot. He can't help seeing that the

mother of a grown-up girl like Diantha hadn't ought to be flirting with a boy like him. If he doesn't see it now he will before he gets her home, or I miss my guess."

Mr. and Mrs. Stanley Sinclair were seated side by side on their front porch, presenting an agreeable picture of domesticity. The reason for Annabel's presence was that the tenor singer of the Unitarian choir was accustomed to pass the house at that hour. Sinclair stayed on simply because he suspected that his wife wished him indoors. He read aloud inane items of village news from the weekly paper, and only the veiled mockery of his eyes betrayed the fact that he was not the most devoted and the most complacent of husbands.

As the two young people came into view, Annabel's air of indifferent listlessness changed to rigid attention. She recognized the gallant figure of the young man considerably before she knew his graceful companion. Her husband's eyes were quicker. His paper dropped from his hand, and his emotions found vent in an explosive and needlessly profane monosyllable.

The two culprits came up the walk, Thad with a fine color, Diantha extraordinarily self-possessed.

The girl's eyes rested on her mother's face, then went in swift appeal to her father's. Their consternation was too obvious to be ignored.

"I wore my new dress home," she remarked casually. Then with sudden recklessness: "Do you like it?"

"It's—it's absurd," pronounced Annabel almost with a snarl. So a mother tigress might have corrected her offspring. Never had she seemed less prepossessing to her youthful adorer than at that moment. Anger aged her indescribably. The young man looked at her and dropped his eyes ashamed.

"It's no longer than other girls of sixteen are wearing," said Diantha, and turned to Thad. "Thank you for carrying my bundle." She took the package and vanished. Nothing in her outward composure indicated that her heart was thumping, and girlhood's ready tears burning under her drooping lids.

Persis' device had been eminently successful, entailing consequences, indeed, she was far from anticipating. For Stanley Sinclair had waked to the fact that he was the father of a beautiful girl on the verge of womanhood, and his sense of parental responsibility, long before drugged, manacled and

locked into a dark cell, had roused at last and was clamoring to be free from its prison. Annabel, his wife, had recognized a possible rival in her own household. And lastly, Thad West was the prey of an uneasy suspicion that perhaps, after all, the mother of Diantha Sinclair had been making a fool of him.

CHAPTER VI

THE NEW ARRIVAL

MINDFUL of her promise to Mrs. Trotter, Persis had looked through her piece-bag apparently with excellent results. For the little garments symbolic of humanity's tenderest hopes, the garments that are to clothe the unborn child, were growing rapidly under her skilful fingers.

The first slip had been severely plain, and then Persis, yielding to a temptation most women will understand, began to fashion scraps of embroidery and odds and ends of lace and insertion into tiny yokes and bands. After many a long day's work she sat by the shaded lamp finishing the diminutive garments with stitches worthy of a bridal outfit.

"Who is it that's expecting?" Joel demanded one evening, his sex not proving an impregnable armor against the assaults of curiosity.

The brevity of Persis' answer indicated reluctance to import the desired information. "Mis' Trotter."

"Bartholomew Trotter's wife? And of course

she's going to pay you for all this fiddling and folderol."

Persis accepted the implied rebuke meekly.

"I guess I'm paying myself in the satisfaction I get out of it. I started in to stitch up some slips on the machine, but I just couldn't stand it. Machine sewing's all right for grown folks, but it does seem that when a little child's getting ready to come into the world, there'd ought to be a needle weaving back and forth, and tender thoughts and hopes weaving along with it. And specially if a baby's going to be born into a home like the Trotters', you can't grudge it a little bit of beauty to start out with."

"Well, I must say it's lucky that so far you women have been kept where you belong. Weaving hopes, indeed! As if 'twould make any difference to that young one of Trotter's whether it was rigged out like a millionaire baby or wrapped up in a horse blanket."

Persis sewed on unmoved. "I don't say the baby'd know the difference. It's just my way of showing respect for the human race."

Her industry was not premature. One Saturday night she carried to the Trotters' squalid home a daintily fashioned, freshly laundered outfit which took Mrs. Trotter's restrained and self-respecting

gratitude quite by storm. Forgetting for once the public obligation to provide for the needs of her family present and to come, she accepted the gift in a silence vastly more eloquent than her usual volubility. Then the muscles of her scrawny throat twitched, and a tear splashed down on the soft cambric. Nor did she, during the interview, recover her usual poise sufficiently to refer to the obligation under which Bartholomew and herself were placing the community; and Persis returned home in a mood of even more than her customary tolerance.

That was Saturday night. Early Monday morning little Benny brought word that his mother was sick and wanted Miss Persis to come right away. Joel had not risen, and Persis scrawled a hasty note explaining her abrupt departure and set out for the Trotter establishment, stopping on the way to ask a favor of Susan Fitzgerald.

Susan was finishing her early breakfast, her hair still wound about her crimping pins, the painfully strained and denuded effect which resulted being a necessary preliminary to the rippling luxuriance of the afternoon. Persis stated her errand tersely.

"Susan, they've sent for me from Trotters', and there's no telling when I'll be home. I wish you'd go up to the house, if you've nothing particular on

hand and look after Joel. He's the helplessest man ever born when it comes to doing for himself."

In her complex excitement, Susan fluttered like an impaled butterfly. "Oh, dear me! I mean of course I will, Persis. But what do you want me to do?"

"Oh, just get his meals and amuse him till I get back. You can keep Joel pretty cheerful if you'll let him unload all his notions on you. Joel generally finds a good listener good comp'ny."

"And so poor Lizzie Trotter's going through that again," exclaimed Susan, momentarily forgetting her own prospective ordeal, in sympathy for the other woman's severer trial. "I don't want to accuse Divine Providence, but I must say it hardly seems fair to put all the responsibility for getting the children into the world off on women. If 'twas turn and turn about, now, I wouldn't say a word."

"I guess if that was the way of it, there'd never be more'n three in a family, and it took a sight of people to fill up the world, starting with the garden of Eden. Well, I must hurry, Susan. I won't be gone a mite longer'n I can help."

As Susan removed her crimping pins, her agitation grew. The favor Persis had asked so lightly, and she had granted so readily, took on a new aspect

as she considered it. Susan shared the respect of Clematis for Joel Dale's intellectuality and stood rather in awe of his foibles. Her hands trembled as she arranged her undulating locks in the fashion ordinarily reserved for afternoons. Her cooking might not suit him. Her efforts to be entertaining might not measure up to his lofty standards. She quaked, picturing his possible displeasure. For this courageous champion of the rights of womankind who did not hesitate to call the Creator Himself to account for seeming injustice, became the meekest of the meek when confronted with the sex from which oppressors are made.

Susan's apprehensions were not so groundless as might be fancied. Joel Dale was in a very bad humor after he had finished reading his sister's note. Joel held the not unpopular theory that the supreme duty of woman is to make some man comfortable. Religion and philanthropy were legitimate diversions if not allowed to interfere with the higher claim. Even the exercise of talent might be tendered a patronizing approval, if this, too, knew its place. Joel was willing that Persis should utilize her gifts in earning his living provided she did not forget the complex ministrations involved in making him "comfortable." He was ready to allow her to help

her poorer neighbors, so that she was never absent when he wanted her. But if that jealous divinity, his Comfort, were denied its due, the indulgent brother was lost in the affronted tyrant.

Poor Susan Fitzgerald found her tremors doubled by the sight of his lowering face. "Mr. Dale, I've come up to keep house for you to-day, seeing—seeing Persis has been called away." She blushed, realizing that Joel was undoubtedly in the secret of that errand. After forty years in a world where birth is the one inevitable human experience, aside from death, she had never been able to rid herself of the impression that it was essentially immodest.

Though the cloud of Jovian displeasure did not remove immediately from Joel's brow, his mood underwent an instant change. His sister had not been guilty of leaving him to shift for himself. The opportune appearance of Susan Fitzgerald indicated a proper regard for the masculine helplessness, which is also, by some obscure process of reasoning, the badge of masculine superiority. Moreover Susan's presence furnished the opportunity of setting forth in detail sundry theories which to Persis were an old story. To a gentleman of Joel's temperament, a new audience is at times a necessity.

"You won't have much trouble getting my meals," he assured her, his cold dignity thawing rapidly. "Just set on the dish of apples and nuts."

Susan's near-sighted eyes narrowed as she gazed at him. "You mean for dessert?"

"Dessert! When Adam and Eve started housekeeping do you s'pose they sat down to soup to begin with and wound up with pie? The Lord put 'em in a garden instead of a butcher's shop, because He wanted 'em to eat vegetable food and not poison themselves with dead animals." Joel's voice had grown almost cheerful. His ardor in the dissemination of his dietetic theories waxed and waned, but when there was a new observer to be impressed, he always found the crucifixion of his appetites well worth while. He seated himself at the table with a gesture which seemed to wave into some remote background the temptation of sausages and buckwheat cakes.

"No trouble for me. Just set on the nuts and apples, same as our ancestors ate before they got wiser'n their Creator and learned to cook their victuals. We're the only animals that ain't satisfied with raw food. And we're the only ones that are everlastingly kicking about indigestion."

"I declare!" exclaimed Susan Fitzgerald, carried away by this masterly logic. "You certainly have your own way of looking at subjects, Mr. Dale."

"Well, I'll admit that I'm not much at taking up with second-hand opinions. Now, here's another idea of mine." He held up a walnut between his thumb and finger. "There's a tree in that, ain't there?"

"Why, yes." Susan's ready admission gave every indication of a willingness to be impressed.

"Well, what's enough to give a start to a tree that may grow seventy feet or over, ought to start a man off to his day's work pretty well. That's my way of reasoning."

"But don't you feel an awful goneness after a breakfast like that?"

"Goneness!" Magnificently Joel waved away the suggestion. "With an apple and five or six good nuts inside me, I feel like I could run through a troop, as the psalmist says, and leap over a wall."

Susan's admiring murmur indicated that the sustaining effect of the diet Joel recommended was due less to its intrinsic virtue than to some unusual and dominating quality of Joel's personality. And Joel, struggling with a peculiarly tough Brazil nut,

reflected that Susan Fitzgerald was an intelligent woman as well as an agreeable one.

The morning passed pleasantly for both. Susan possessed the gift which men have ever highly esteemed in the sex, the faculty of continued silence, combined with close attention. Some of Joel's theories impressed her as startling, but like many very proper people, Susan rather enjoyed being shocked, if the sensation was not overdone. Whether she murmured approval or blushed in decorous protest, it was plain that she found Joel's monologues immensely interesting. She could hardly believe her ears when the clock struck twelve.

Susan brought the nuts and apples out again after their brief period of retirement, and seated herself at the table, to share the Eden-like repast. "You'd be an awful easy man to cook for, Mr. Dale," she said, with a glance which in another woman would have been coquettish.

But the arrow glanced harmless. Joel's mood was abstracted. Not for some time had he put into practise his theories regarding uncooked food, and his rebellious appetite craved more stimulating fare. He munched his nuts with distracting memories of yesterday's pot roast. He found himself resenting

Susan's eager compliance. She should have insisted on preparing him a good meal—good from her standpoint—and as a gentleman he could have done no less than show his appreciation by eating it.

For once Joel had lost interest in his own eloquence. Inward voices were protesting against this return to the fare which had satisfied Father Adam. When he retired to the armchair, after dinner, and relapsed into a sulky silence, Susan remembered that the obligation to amuse him was also nominated in the bond. Luckily his tastes were literary, which rendered her task a simple one.

Susan stepped into the tightly-closed, partially darkened parlor which never in the sultriest weather seemed wholly to lose the chill of its unwarmed winter days. The center of the room was occupied by a square table, on each corner of which lay a book, the four arranged with geometrical nicety. Susan was too familiar with Clematis traditions not to know that the books on the center-table were seldom of a sort one would care to open, but as she lifted the nearest volume and saw that it was a collections of poems, she felt a comforting certainty that luck was with her.

"You're a great admirer of po'try, ain't you, Mr. Dale? I've always understood so."

With an effort Joel roused himself.

"Another has expressed my sentiments, Miss Fitzgerald.

" 'Verse sweetens toil, however rude the sound.' "

"Then if you'd like, I'll read you a little so's to help pass the time." Susan seated herself near the window, cleared her throat and opening the volume at random, began in the self-conscious and unnatural voice characterizing ninety-nine people out of every hundred who attempt the reading of verse.

" 'O there's a heart for every one
If every one could find it.
Then up and seek, ere youth is gone,
Whate'er the task, ne'er mind it.
For if you chance to meet at last
With that one heart intended—' "

Susan's voice had grown husky. She cleared her throat again. "I'm afraid I made a poor selection," she apologized. "You see I'm not as familiar with po'try as you are, Mr. Dale." She turned the leaves in a confusion that increased as her groping vision stumbled continually on lines startingly sentimental.

" 'Let thy love in kisses rain
On my cheeks and eye-lids pale.' "

Susan opened ten pages ahead and tried again.

" 'When stars are in the quiet skies,
Then most I pine for thee.
Bend on me, then, thy tender eyes,
As stars look on the sea.' "

Joel's change of position was subtly suggestive of weariness. Susan whirled the leaves and took a desperate plunge.

" 'Ask if I love thee? O, smiles can not tell
Plainer what tears are now showing too well.
Had I not loved thee my sky had been clear;
Had I not loved thee, I had not been here.' "

It was plainly impossible for a self-respecting single woman to continue. "Why, they're all silly," she exclaimed, with a little nervous giggle. Her face flamed. What was she to say next, not only to carry out Persis Dale's injunction, but to occupy the blank silence which contradictorily seemed echoing with that fateful refrain, "Had I not loved thee I had not been here."

When in doubt, play trumps. Susan Fitzgerald's chief interest in life was the question of woman's suffrage. And the confusion which had swept her

mind bare of small talk, had not jostled her substantial ideas on the familiar theme. She determined to broach the subject delicately and with caution. If Joel cared for discussion, this would occupy a good portion of the afternoon, and be a sufficient antidote for her unfortunate poetical selections. It was even possible that a strong forceful presentation of the case might result in making a convert. Susan thrilled, realizing what such an accession would mean to the cause.

"Mr. Dale," she began, feeling her way to a tactful introduction. "I am sure you must have a pretty good opinion of women. A man with such a sister as you've got couldn't help it."

Her opening was unfortunate. No man is so reluctant to recognize feminine superiority as the one who profits most by the gifts of some woman. Joel's brow clouded, and his answer showed a cautious resolve not to be trapped into any compromising admission.

"Oh, I haven't anything against women folks. I've always thought the poet went too far when he said:

"'Mankind from Adam has been woman's fools.
Women from Eve have been the Devil's tools.'"

Despite the negative nature of this encouragement, Susan continued.

"I'm sure a fair-minded man like you are, Mr. Dale, wouldn't want to keep any woman out of what rightfully belonged to her. You'd want her to have a chance to fill her place in the world, wouldn't you?"

"Why, yes, I'd be in favor of that." Joel's voice was less positive than his words, owing to an inward uncertainty as to the trend of these observations.

"Well, Mr. Dale, there's lots of us that are ready to take up our share of the duties the Creator designed for us. We are standing waiting like the people in the parable that nobody had hired. The trouble is you won't let us, you men won't. We've got to wait for you to give us our rights. All our willingness doesn't amount to anything till you are ready."

A sudden harassing suspicion assailed the target of Susan's eloquence, and no sooner had it entered his mind than a dozen details instantly corroborated it. Joel remembered the look which had accompanied Susan's declaration that he would be an easy man to cook for. The love poems had in themselves been equivalent to an avowal of passion even without her tell-tale blushes. And now at last he grasped

the underlying meaning of her vague hints and obscure figures of speech. For though she talked of rights and duties and the designs of the Creator, there could be no doubt that she meant a husband.

Joel rose to his feet and his mute tempestuous indignation was not without interest as throwing light on the workings of the masculine mind. In such a design as he attributed to Susan, it would seem that the lady had much to lose and little to gain. She was vigorous, well-preserved, possessed of a competence, while Joel was doubly bankrupt. Yet his mood was far removed from humble gratitude. He was furious at her presumption, alert to defend his threatened prerogatives, angry at Persis for exposing him to such an attack under his own roof where ignominious retreat was his only safety.

"I've just thought of a little matter I've got to look after this afternoon," he said, his manner nicely calculated to repel any tender advances. "I'll have to hurry along, and there won't be any occasion for you to linger. Please hang the key on the nail so Persis can let herself in when she comes."

His sudden hauteur was not lost on Susan. She sighed as he withdrew.

"Funny how real liberal-minded men won't listen to argument when it comes to some questions. But

maybe he'll think over what I said and it'll have an influence sooner or later. Anyway, we've got to be prepared to sow beside all waters."

The leather-covered book, whose failure to serve her purpose was indirectly responsible for the broaching of so delicate a question, caught her wandering attention. She picked it up, reading the title aloud.

"*Love Songs of Many Lands.* No wonder I couldn't find one that was sensible. Well, I declare!"

The book had opened at the fly-leaf. "Persis from Justin," Susan read, bringing her near-sighted eyes close to the faded ink. She pursed her lips and shook her head in disapproving surprise.

"Persis Dale must have known some man pretty well to let him give her anything so pointed. I should have thought she'd have felt awfully embarrassed if she ever read the poems. Justin! Justin! There was a Justin Ware, but I never heard there was anything between them."

She returned the book to the chilly front room, adjusting it to the proper angle on the center-table, as if it had been a part of a geometrical diagram. And finally, after locking the door and hanging the key where Persis, or any other arrival, would imme-

diately notice it, she turned her downcast face toward home.

"I'm afraid I hurt Mr. Dale's feelings. It beats all how sensitive some natures are. It's lucky I didn't get as far as what you would call the real telling arguments."

If Susan Fitzgerald's mood was despondent, as she reviewed the activities of the day, such was not the case wih Persis Dale. In the Trotters' shabby cottage, exaltation reigned. Young Doctor Ballard, lean and boyish, looked ready to be congratulated on a good piece of work, though perfectly aware he could never in this world, at least, collect his fee for medical attendance. Bartholomew's complacent self-importance almost straightened his bowed shoulders and redeemed the weakness of his sagging lips and feeble chin. Lizzie, his wife, spent and pallid, her gaunt temples hollowed and her face chiseled by suffering, smiled contentedly as she lay against her pillow, a creature lifted for the moment above the petty weaknesses, pitiable fruit of life-long and grinding poverty, by the gracious dignity of motherhood. As for Persis, as she carried the new arrival down-stairs to make the acquaintance of his brothers and sisters, her comely face was radiant.

Weariness was forgotten. The hours of uncertainty, the long hours when Life and Death matched forces in that old duel renewed with each new existence, had all been forgotten. For a man was born.

The little Trotters gathered around in an ecstasy of pleasure and surprise. In a household where food was scanty, and every new pair of shoes was a serious economic problem, there was no lack of welcome for the newcomer. Chirpy little voices commented on the new brother's surprising pinkness, his diminutive proportions and his belligerent fashion of clenching his fists.

"He's got on the nice clean dress the angels made him," said Winnie, the observant. "See the lace in the sleeves."

"I wish the angels had made him some hair instead," suggested Wilbur, plainly aggrieved. "'Cause he could have worn some of our old clothes, but he can't wear our hair."

"He can have my jack-knife when he gets big enough," declared Benny, the oldest of the flock. He drew the cherished possession from his pocket as if ready to surrender it on the instant. And that offer was a signal for a general outburst of generosity.

"He can have my tooth brush."

"I'll give him my rubber boot. Maybe when he's big enough to wear it, somebody will give him one for the other leg."

"You're going to let the new baby have your high chair, ain't you, Essie?" Thus Winnie prompted the sister now compelled to relinquish the honors and dignities attaching to the post of baby of the family. And Essie, nodding her little tow head, laid a rose-leaf cheek against the crumpled carnation of the newcomer. "Nice litty brudder," she cooed. "Essie loves 'oo."

"My gracious me!" thought Persis Dale, as she tucked the baby into the battered cradle, never long without an occupant. "It's queer that we ain't shaking our heads and groaning over this. The Trotters can't afford a new baby any more than I can afford a steam yacht. There ain't enough of anything to go around, and yet we're all holding up our heads and acting as if this was the best day's work we ever had a hand in. It's no use talking. Down in our hearts we know that life's a good thing, even when we've got to take poverty and hardships along with it. And that's why we start in singing Psalms in spite of ourselves when a new baby comes."

CHAPTER VII

A CONFIDENTIAL CHAT

"I BELIEVE," said young Mr. Thompson, "that I've been owing you a little bill for some weeks, Miss Dale. It had completely slipped my mind."

He looked old and worn, Persis thought, more like the man who must settle for the spring finery of a family of grown daughters, than a complacent young husband paying for his wife's first new gown since the wedding. There was a flatness in his voice that matched the weariness in his eyes, and forthwith a dozen questions raced through her alert brain.

"Well, Mr. Thompson, I hope you like the dress. I always tell my customers that I'm as anxious to please their husbands as I am to please them. 'Tain't fair, from my point of view, to ask a man to pay out good money for clothes he just despises."

Evasion is an art possessed in its perfection by few of the sterner sex.

"Mrs. Thompson hasn't worn the dress yet,"

explained Mrs. Thompson's husband. "I dare say it's very pretty." He had taken a little roll of bills from his pocket, but his absent air showed conclusively that he was thinking neither of them nor of his answer.

Persis lowered her voice confidentially.

"If I was you, Mr. Thompson, I wouldn't encourage her in that way of doing. Maybe it seems like prejudiced advice, coming from a dressmaker, so, but I never could see there was any saving in hanging a dress away in the closet and not getting any wear out of it, till it was clear out of style. You know how it is with young wives. They've got their hearts so set on having their husbands praise 'em for being saving that they make those little mistakes. You just tell her that you'd rather spend a little more money, if it came to that, and see her look her prettiest."

"Mrs. Thompson is not—" began the young husband and broke off uncertainly. His troubled eyes went to the kind resolute face opposite, and the little roll of greenbacks dropped to the floor unheeded. "Fact is," said the young fellow, carried away by that impulse toward confidence which the sight of Persis was likely to inspire in the least communicative, "fact is we're having the deuce of a time."

Persis nodded understandingly. "That ain't strange the first year or so. After the honeymoon's over, then comes the getting acquainted. I don't care how well folks have known each other beforehand, they've got to start all over again after they're married. But don't worry; it don't take long as a rule."

"You don't quite get my idea." Young Mr. Thompson scowled at the floor. "It's worse than you think. I'm in a fix, a devil of a fix. Part of it I'm to blame for. I'm one of those guys with a sense of humor, you know. I'm the regular George Cohan kind, and between my practical jokes and some interfering old maids—I—I beg your pardon."

"I'm not partial to 'em myself," smiled Persis reassuringly.

There was an instant of understanding silence. "Well, anyway," groaned the young man, "with a little outside help, I've queered myself for good. And that's tough on a chap not a year married, believe me."

He stared at the floor gloomily and when he lifted his eyes, she saw the whole story on its way. "You wouldn't call Thompson an unusual name, would you?"

"One of the commonest, I should say."

"And there's nothing so strange about 'W. Thompson' that you'd strain your neck getting another look at it on a sign. Half the men you meet are named William, to say nothing of the Walters and the Warrens, and the new crop of Woodrow Wilsons."

Persis' murmur of agreement was admirably calculated to encourage the flow of confidence, not to check it.

"Look at that." Young Mr. Thompson pulled a letter from his pocket and slammed it down on the table. "There's the proof that I'm a hound and a blackguard and that hanging would be too good for me. At least that's what all the women tell my wife. And take it from me, they know."

Persis picked up the envelope and studied the superscription. It had originally been addressed to Mr. W. Thompson, Hollenden Hotel, Cleveland, Ohio, and later redirected in another hand to the firm by which Mr. Thompson was employed. The unhappy husband explained:

"Our men generally stop at the Hollenden when they are in Cleveland. I never was there in my life. But Hudson, one of our fellows, blew in one night and noticing a letter directed to W. Thompson, he knew, of course, it must be for me. That's just

the sort of 'buttinski' that Hudson is. If he'd run across a tombstone with W. Thompson on it, he'd have expressed it to me before he'd eaten his dinner. So he told the clerk he knew me and sent the letter on to the main office. Now, perhaps you'll appreciate the rest of my story better, if you'll read the letter."

Gratified by the permission, for young Mr. Thompson had succeeded in piquing her curiosity, Persis drew the enclosure from the envelope and for an instant studied the monogram at the head of the sheet. When her gaze dropped to the address, her eyebrows lifted.

"Yes, I know," murmured young Mr. Thompson. "'Tommy darling.' Tommy is short for Thompson, I suppose. Tommy-rot, I call it. You might read it aloud if you don't mind. It'll help me to have a realization of what I'm up against."

Persis complied.

"Tommy darling:

"Here I am writing you again for all I promised myself that I wouldn't—not ever. It makes me feel so dishonorable when I think of Her. And then, dear, I think of you and everything else is forgotten for a little while.

"That lovely, sad, happy, heart-breaking afternoon together! I've lived on the memory of it ever since.

I thought when we said good-by that it was for the last time. I really meant it, dear. But now the thought of never seeing you again is like a great black wall shutting out everything bright and beautiful. I'm not brave enough to bear it.

"Tell me when and where we can see each other, Tommy. I'm not going to think of Her, but only of you and me and the joy of loving and being loved. "Enid."

"She seems," observed Persis Dale, folding the letter carefully, "to be of a real affectionate disposition." Young Mr. Thompson passed the comment over without remark.

"They gave me the letter at the office. It was pretty near a month after it was written and I judged the two of them had seen each other before that, and one lost letter wouldn't matter. And then it occurred to me that I'd have a little fun with Molly. Get me?"

Persis' look indicated understanding rather than approval.

"You can't think worse than I've said to myself a thousand times. I put the letter in my pocket, and I had it all figured out how she'd find it and ask me about it, and then read it and be angry for about half a minute. And I took it for granted that I was going to be right there to explain and that

I'd have the laugh on her before she had the chance to get to feeling real bad. It looked awful funny to me. It's a great thing to have a man-size sense of humor."

Persis was too interested to smile.

"Then the weather got warm and I changed to another suit and forgot to change the letter. I'd laid several little plots to help her to find it, like sending her to my pocket for postage stamps, but she didn't fall to 'em, and finally the letter got to be an old story. I pretty nearly forgot all about it. When she did find it, I was off on a trip and she'd talked the thing over with all the old women in the neighborhood before I got back." He ran his fingers through his hair. "Explain! Well, she thinks it's a mighty slim story, and the deuce of it is that she's right. Any darn fool could make up a better one."

"I b'lieve you could have done better yourself," Persis suggested smoothly, "if you'd been in the story business."

The young fellow looked at her, and a quick flush swept to the roots of his hair.

"That sounds," he began breathlessly, "that sounds as if you took stock in me in spite of the way things look."

"I've lived long enough to know that looks are

deceiving whether you're talking about women or just things." Persis studied the address again and compressed her lips. "See that this letter don't get lost, strayed or stolen," she directed, with that instinctive assumption of authority which is the badge of the competent. "We might find it useful in clearing things up."

The young man's ruddy color rose again. "Then you think—" he faltered and broke off.

"I think that when folks act fair and square, their lives ain't going to be ruined by a little mistake. Of course it's going to be cleared up. Careful, Mr. Thompson. You seem to be stepping on a lot of money. And it must belong to you, because I can't afford to carpet my room with greenbacks."

His answering laugh showed the contagion of her optimism. Young Mr. Thompson picked up his money and paid his bill. "I'm going home and coax Molly into putting on that new dress," he declared boyishly. "It's the first dress I ever bought for her, and I'm crazy to see how she looks in it."

Persis approved the suggestion. "But don't be discouraged if she needs a lot of coaxing. It's as natural for women to primp and fuss and fix their hair up pretty ways when they're feeling happy as 'tis for plants to put out leaves in the spring. But

heavy hearts are like winter weather. If you want any blossoms in December, you've got to work for 'em." She wrote "received payment" beneath Mr. Thompson's bill and went to the secretary for the change. Young Mr. Thompson pocketed his forty-five cents and detained the hand that tendered it.

"Look here, Miss Dale," he said, "you've braced me up wonderfully. I feel more like a man and less like a feather-bolster than I did when I came in. I wonder if you couldn't—" He hesitated and pressed her fingers persuasively. "Couldn't you manage to drop a hint to Molly about appearances being deceptive, you know."

"I'll say more than that before I'm done with her," Persis promised briskly. And they shook hands over again, and young Mr. Thompson departed with an alert step that argued a corresponding lightness of heart. And because Persis Dale was a woman of action, she sat down at the secretary and penned a letter to a total stranger, to Mr. W. Thompson, care of the Hollenden Hotel, Cleveland. The letter itself was brief and to the point.

"Dear Sir:

"I should like to know if you are expecting word

from a young woman named Enid. In case you are, kindly communicate with the undersigned.

"Yours truly,
"Persis Dale."

Brief as the letter was its composition took some little time. The deftness which characterized Persis in most of her work, did not extend to her epistolary efforts. She was still puckering her forehead over the page when Thomas Hardin knocked. The door was ajar and glancing over her shoulder, she called to him to enter.

"You'll excuse me for not getting up, Thomas. When once I sit down to an ink bottle, I stick to it till I finish. I'm in a hurry to get this letter off to-night." She wrote the address and dried the ink by moving the paper gently back and forth.

Thomas' face showed relief. He had come prepared to make a painful disclosure and the brief period of waiting was as welcome as similar postponement to the possessor of an aching tooth who calls at the dentist's office and finds the practitioner busy. But as Persis immediately proceeded to fold the letter and seal the envelope, his respite was brief.

"Persis, did you know there was insanity in my family?"

Persis, applying a crumpled stamp to the tip of her tongue, started violently. "Good gracious, Thomas, no! I never heard it mentioned."

"I thought maybe 'twas my duty to speak to you about it. It was my great-uncle, Captain Silas Hardin. He was my father's uncle, and he—"

"Why, I know all about him, Thomas. How he was shipwrecked off in the Indian Ocean somewhere and floated around on a raft, and the different ones got crazy with the heat and thirst and all and jumped overboard. And it was an English ship that found the old caption, and he was just raving when they took him aboard. I can remember him when I was a little girl. There was a blue anchor tattooed on his hand, and I thought it was the most wonderful thing in the world. But then he was as sensible as anybody."

"Yes, he was all right in his later days, but when he first came home from England, he had lots of queer ways about him, I've heard my mother say. And as long as he lived, he'd stand off and stare at the corner of the room where there wasn't nothing with his eyes kind of fixed, and it was enough to make your hair rise up to look at him."

"I don't wonder, poor soul. I guess if we'd seen what he had, there'd be times when it would all come

back to us. By the way, Thomas, seeing as you go right past the post-office, I'll ask you to mail this letter. I want it to be sure to get off the first mail."

Thomas tacitly accepted the commission by holding out his hand for the letter. Then he read the superscription. "W. Thompson! Why, there's a W. Thompson in Clematis."

"This," replied Persis, and the confidence of her tone would have warmed the heart of young Mr. Thompson, "this is a different one."

Thomas waited to hear more, but no further particulars were vouchsafed. He felt mildly aggrieved. "Didn't know you had acquaintances in Cleveland," he suggested by way of a stimulus to confidence.

"I haven't many." Persis compressed her lips, and Thomas looked again at the envelope. The sense of elation due to the discovery that Persis was disposed to regard the insanity of Captain Silas Hardin lightly, was eclipsed by a new anxiety. Persis had friends of whose existence he was unaware. She corresponded with men in distant cities. These apparently trivial facts took on greater import as he mused. His own chances to win her, disheartenningly small at the best of times in view of his checkered record, suddenly sank below the level of insignificance and ceased to exist.

He looked across at Persis on the other side of the table. She had picked up a piece of sewing, but her look of absorption showed that her trained fingers were doing their work without the supervision of the brain. Nor could he flatter himself that her thoughts were of him. He was a modest man, but for the moment he resented with bitterness the self-evident fact that she was temporarily oblivious to his presence.

He got to his feet, pushing back his chair noisily. "Maybe I'd better be going, so's your letter will be dead sure to get to the post-office on time," he said, his voice harsh with disappointment.

Persis stooped to bite a thread. "Thank you, Thomas," she answered placidly. "I'll be easier in my mind when I know it's mailed."

CHAPTER VIII

EVE AND THE APPLE

JOEL was aggrieved. For the second time in a month his sister was planning to desert him. Putting the claims of an unborn infant before his comfort, Persis had basely abandoned him to the wiles of Susan Fitzgerald. And now she had agreed, though reluctantly, to do a day's work for Mrs. Hornblower at the latter's home. That thrifty housewife had urged a lame knee as her reason for requesting Persis to depart so radically from her usual custom, and Persis had accepted the excuse with reservations.

"Fact is, Lena Hornblower can never get it into her head that I'm a dressmaker and not a sewing girl," Persis confided to Joel at the breakfast table. "I'm not saying that her knee ain't lame, but I guess if she can stand up to be fitted, she'd be equal to getting in and out of a buggy. Lena Hornblower's always looking for a chance to save a penny. She's got an idea that it's bound to be cheaper to

have your sewing done at the house. All I can say," concluded Persis, buttering her toast, "is that she's going to find herself mistaken."

Joel's abstracted gaze indicated a total lack of interest in the subject.

"I've been thinking," he remarked with that suavity of manner as prophetic of a storm as thunderclaps in July, "that I might as well get me a room somewhere in the neighborhood. There's no sense in making a pretense that you're keeping house for me when you're gadding and gadding, here to-day and to-morrow off the Lord knows where. If I had a comfortable room, somewheres," continued Joel, with the noble resignation of conscious martyrdom, "and a little stove so's I could get my meals, then I'd know just what to expect, and I wouldn't have to ask no odds of nobody."

Persis had listened to similar propositions before. It was a perennial threat which in the passing of years had lost its power to terrify. Yet with the inevitable feminine impulse to smooth the feathers of ruffled masculinity, she began, "When I drove by Susan Fitzgerald's yesterday morning—"

Joel set down his coffee cup with an emphasis that splashed the table-cloth.

"That'll do, Persis. I'll tell you once for all that

I won't have that woman here. I can go hungry if it comes to that, but I won't stand for your putting that old maid up to set her cap for me."

"Goodness, Joel, Susan hasn't any reason in life to want to marry—anybody." Persis had come very near an uncomplimentary frankness, but her native tact had suddenly asserted itself and made the statement general.

Joel smiled satirically.

"Maybe you know better'n I do about that, and then again, maybe you don't," he replied darkly. Then with a reversion to his air of injury, he added: "Here's Hornblower come for you already."

As a matter of fact, the thrifty Mrs. Hornblower had despatched her husband for Persis at the earliest hour permissible, resolved to prove the economy of her scheme by adding to the activities of the day at both ends. Persis, quite aware of her patron's purpose, smiled comprehendingly and proceeded to clear the table without undue haste or excitement. Mr. Hornblower had waited full thirty minutes before she came lightly down the path and with unruffled serenity bade him good morning.

"Sorry to keep you waiting, but you were half an hour ahead of the time I said."

Robert Hornblower, who had that repressed and

submissive air not infrequent in husbands whose wives make a boast of their womanly subjection, mumbled that it didn't matter. As he helped her to her seat, Persis noticed that he had lost flesh since she had seen him last, and that some plow-share, sharper than that of time, had deepened the furrows that criss-crossed his sagging cheeks. "How're the crops coming on?" she asked, as she settled herself beside him.

"Fine!" Mr. Hornblower spoke with a lack of reserve unusual in his pessimistic profession. "Potatoes ain't quite up to last year, but the corn crop's a record breaker."

"Mis' Hornblower's knee trouble her much?"

"Well, no, not to say trouble." Mr. Hornblower plucked his beard with his disengaged hand and cast a thoughtful glance at his companion. "She's a little oneasy in her mind though, Mis' Hornblower is. She's got an idea in her head and it keeps her as oneasy as a flea. If she should open up to you, maybe you'd see your way to say something kind of quieting."

"But what's she got to worry about?"

"That's what I say," said Mr. Hornblower, gesturing with his whip. "We're comf'table and prosperous, ain't we? Maybe there's a way to get more.

I don't say there ain't. But what's the use of more, when you've got enough? The house suits me just as 'tis, and my victuals suit me, and my friends that I've summered and wintered with, forty years and over, they suit me, too. What do I want of a villa, or of trips to Europe, where the folks talk all kinds of heathenish gibberish instead of good United States!"

"But I don't see how—"

"Maybe she'll open up to you," repeated Mr. Hornblower, lowering his voice though such a precaution was obviously unnecessary. "Mind I don't say it ain't a pretty scheme. Anyhow, it looks good on paper. But with me the point's just here—enough's enough."

Persis found Mrs. Hornblower more communicative than her spouse. As all roads lead to Rome, so, with Mrs. Hornblower, all topics of conversation led directly to the subject uppermost in her thoughts. The inevitable discussion of the prevailing modes led by a short path to Persis' full enlightenment.

"I want it fixed real tasty, Persis, for all it's not a new dress. I've had it going on four years, but I've been sparing of it and careful, so it's not like a dress you wear for getting supper and for trailing round in the yard after the dew falls. Robert's

always been fond of this dress. I s'pose I'm kind of foolish to humor him so, but I'm always careful about consulting his tastes. Seems as if a wife had ought to be satisfied if she dresses in a way that pleases her husband."

"Sometimes I've thought," replied Persis, as she turned the pages of her latest fashion magazine, "that when it comes to women's clothes, men don't know what they do like. If a man goes with his wife to buy a hat, nine times out of ten, he'll pick out the worst-looking thing in the shop, and then he'll wonder why she's falling off in her looks. Now, Mis' Hornblower, what do you think of this pannier style? Taking out the extra fulness from the back and using it in folds, I could hide where it's getting worn on the seams."

"I s'pose we'd have a better choice of styles by waiting for next month's book," said Mrs. Hornblower, regarding the model Persis had indicated with an evident lack of favor. "But my plans are so unsettled that I want to hurry through my dressmaking. I dare say you've heard we're likely to leave Clematis 'most any time."

"I'd heard it hinted, but I didn't take much stock in it. Clematis would be sorry to lose you, and it would be pretty hard on you leaving Clematis."

Mrs. Hornblower smiled. "Oh, I haven't a thing against Clematis, Persis. Robert says that of course it doesn't give a man any kind of a chance to make money and I guess he's right. I believe in leaving such things for the men-folks to settle. These new-fangled women who are always setting up to know best and saying what they will do and what they won't do, can't have much of an opinion of the Bible. I'm sure it says as plain as the nose on your face 'wives obey your husbands,' and 'where thou goest I will go.'"

Persis scrutinized the back breadths of the lavender foulard. "But Ruth was talking to her mother-in-law," she objected, off her guard for the instant, since only the death of Mrs. Hornblower senior, had ended the hostilities between herself and her son's wife. Then regretting her tactless words, she hastened to say, "Don't you think that when a man gets to Mr. Hornblower's age, he does better in work he's used to than if he tries his hand at something new? It's easy enough transplanting a sapling, but an old tree's different."

"It all depends," replied Mrs. Hornblower coldly, piqued, as Persis had feared, by her reference to the delicate subject. But her desire to dazzle the plodding dressmaker with visions of her future pros-

perity, proved too much for her resentment. And soon, as they ripped and basted, Mrs. Hornblower was dilating on the unparalleled opportunity for wealth furnished by the Apple of Eden Investment Company. She quoted freely from its literature and outlined, with more or less detail, the care-free and opulent existence upon which the family of Hornblower would enter when the farm had been sold and the proceeds wisely invested.

"It's a disappointment to me that the whole thing isn't settled and done with by this time. But I always leave Robert to decide such matters, and Robert thought 'twas best to wait till Mr. Ware's visit. Ouch! My goodness gracious, Persis! You must take my arm for a pin-cushion."

This time Persis' contrition was not assumed.

"I'm awfully sorry, Mis' Hornblower. The lining's so thin. I'll have the sleeve off in a shake before it gets spotted."

"That'll have to be bandadged," exclaimed Mrs. Hornblower, surveying her injured arm in the mirror with a not unnatural annoyance. "A little prick is to be expected now and then when you're dressmaking, but this was a regular jab. I don't know what ails you, Persis. Looks like your mind must have been running on Thomas Hardin."

Persis' unwonted humility was disarming, and by dinner-time Mrs. Hornblower was sufficiently recovered to be patronizing.

"Of course this foulard is a sort of make-shift, you might say, Persis. It'll do me till I have a chance to get something real up-to-date and dressy in Paris."

Persis, laying down her work as the clock struck twelve, had no reply to make, and Robert Hornblower, whose punctuality at meals was notable, a characteristic shared by all henpecked husbands, entered the house at that moment, casting a quick glance at his wife's face as a sailor watches the sky for signs of a squall.

"We've spent the morning fixing up your favorite gown, so as it'll be pretty near as good as new," Persis informed him, as she accepted a well-filled plate at his hands. Then as the farmer looked a little blank, she directed his attention to the renovated lavender foulard hanging over a chair.

Mr. Hornblower's expression was still vague. "Oh, you mean that pink—"

The women interrupted him with a derisive cry of "Pink!" But while Persis laughed, Mrs. Hornblower flashed upon her husband a look of ineffable scorn.

"As if I'd ever wore pink or ever would, a color for children."

"Them bright colors is all one to me," said the unhappy Mr. Hornblower, proceeding with fatal facility to make a bad matter worse. "They're all too kind of flashy. Now, my mother used to have a dress," he continued, meeting Persis' sympathetic gaze, "that suited me down to the ground. Satin, it was, or maybe 'twas silk or velvet. Anyhow, it looked rich. And it was sort of silvery, and then again, darker'n silver and sort of ripply and shiny—"

"Robert ain't very well posted on names," said Robert's wife with deadly calm. "But he knows what he likes, same as most men, and that lavender foulard has always been his special favorite. His special favorite," she repeated sternly, as she met her husband's wavering eye.

"Oh, the lavender foulard!" exclaimed Mr. Hornblower, with an unsuccessful attempt to give the impression that only at that moment had he discovered what they were talking about. "The lavender foulard, to be sure." He cut himself an enormous slice from the boiled beef and bowed his head over his plate, as if offering thanks for an excuse to retire gracefully from the conversation.

But this did not agree with Mrs. Hornblower's

intentions, "Tired, ain't you, Robert?" Her solicitude was so marked as to suggest an ulterior motive.

"I guess this is about as busy a time of year as any," commented Persis.

And Mr. Hornblower, having now reached a point in his struggle with the boiled beef where he could make himself intelligible, began ponderously, "Oh, as far as that goes—"

"Robert realizes that he ain't as young as he was," said Mrs. Hornblower, taking the words from his mouth. "While he's not an old man yet, he feels that he's done his share of work. If there's a good time waiting for him, he means to get to it before he's so old it won't do him any good."

"Sometimes I think," observed Persis sententiously, "that enjoying one's self's a good deal like jam. You spread it on bread and butter, and you can eat a sight of it. But if you set down to a pot of jam and nothing else, it turns your stomach in no time."

The sudden illumination of Mr. Hornblower's heavy features indicated that he had grasped Persis' metaphor. He broke out eagerly. "Now, that's just what I was saying to my wife. If a man—"

"Robert looks at it this way," explained Mrs. Hornblower, deftly cutting in. "He says he couldn't

enjoy himself just idling, but he don't look on travel and improving his mind in that light. Robert feels that enlarging your horizon, and getting culture and polish is a part of anybody's duty. Robert feels real strongly on that subject," concluded Mrs. Hornblower, looking hard at her husband, as if defying him to deny it.

The worm made a visible effort to turn. "Whatever you may say about Clematis," said Mr. Hornblower, apparently with the full intention of paying an impassioned tribute to his native town. But again the supports were cut from beneath his feet, and he was left dangling in midair.

"Robert thinks as well of Clematis as anybody," Mrs. Hornblower acknowledged generously. "He's got a real fondness for the town. But as he says, the world's a big place, and it don't stand to reason that all of it that's worth seeing is right under our noses. Robert says that some folks who think they're so dreadful patriotic are nothing in the world but narrow."

For a moment Mr. Hornblower seemed tempted to take up the gauntlet with himself, challenging his own forcibly expressed convictions. And then as if realizing the uselessness of such an attempt, he sighed heavily and sought consolation in the gravy.

And Mrs. Hornblower demonstrated the sweeping character of her victory by saying plaintively: "Of course a woman always feels breaking off old associations the way a man can't understand. Robert laughs at me. He says he b'lieves I fairly get attached to a mop I've used and hate to change to a new one. But a woman can't be a good wife, Persis, and think of herself. She's just got to set aside her own feelings and preferences, and look at what's best for her husband."

It was characteristic of Mrs. Hornblower's shrewdness that supper was always late when she had a dressmaker in the house. The fire refused to draw. A scarcity of eggs necessitated a change in her plans for supper, and the new menu invariably demanded more time than that originally decided upon. Persis, left to herself, and thoroughly understanding the purpose back of these various delays and postponements, smiled grimly, yet not without a certain reluctant admiration, and retaliated by sewing more and more slowly. And for the hundredth time that day, her thoughts returned to Mrs. Hornblower's careless reference to a prospective visit. Mr. Ware! Could she have meant Justin? His connection with the apple company made this seem almost certain, and yet it was in-

conceivable that Lena Hornblower should refer to his coming with such nonchalant certainty when she herself was in the dark. Persis' capable hands dropped to her lap. For the minute she was a girl again, parting from the boy who loved her, lifting her tear-wet face for the comfort of his kisses. Twenty years! Twenty long hard years! And now Justin Ware was really coming home.

She put the question bluntly to Robert Hornblower as he drove her home after dark. "Your wife said something about a Mr. Ware's coming here before long. I used to go to school with somebody of that name, Justin Ware."

The depressed and silent Mr. Hornblower roused himself.

"It's the same one. The Wares never had nothing, but I guess this here Justin has cleaned up a lot of money. Don't follow that everybody could do the same in his place, though. Some folks have the luck, and some have got the pluck, and some have both." He sighed. "Of course you understand, Persis, that Lena wants me to do exactly as I think best. Only —only when a woman gets her heart set on a thing, a man feels like a brute to think of having his own way."

"Yes," Persis said gently, "I understand." And

then with more optimism than she felt she added: "Maybe something will happen so she'll look at it different."

Thomas Hardin and Joel were awaiting her in the unsocial silence characteristic of their sex when no feminine incentive to conversational brilliancy is at hand. Thomas' eyes kindled as he said good evening. Joel, after two meals in which he had fended for himself, looked more than ever like an early Christian martyr. "There's a letter come for you," he said with marked coldness.

Persis whirled about, a wild foolish hope in her heart. "A letter? Where?"

"On the mantel, next the clock!" Joel's eyes followed his sister as she crossed the room with that quick light step, so reminiscent of girlhood. She pounced upon the letter and even her brother's eyes, dimmed by life-long self-absorption, could see that her face fell.

"I didn't know you knew anybody in Cleveland."

"Cleveland." In some mysterious manner Persis' animation had returned. The confirmed meddler has one thing in her favor, that whatever the crisis of her own fortunes, there are always the affairs of other people to distract her thoughts. She dropped into a chair by the lamp and read the

brief letter with breathless interest, too absorbed even to apologize.

"Miss Persis Dale,
"Clematis.

"Dear Madam—Yours of the 12th inst. received. I am at a loss to understand your very extraordinary inquiry, unless by some chance a letter intended for me has fallen into your hands. In that case I am enclosing stamps to have it forwarded by special delivery. I hardly need remind you that it is a serious offence in the eyes of the law to retain mail which is the property of another person.

"Yours truly,
"W. Thompson.
"Hollenden Hotel, Cleveland, Ohio."

Joel stared at his sister as she read down the page, her color rising, a curious, triumphant little smile playing about her lips. Thomas glowered at the floor. So this answer to the letter he himself had posted, was responsible for that look on her face.

"I guess I'll have to be going," he exclaimed, getting to his feet with the conviction that he had borne all that was possible for the time being.

Persis glanced up in surprise. "Already, Thomas? Well, give my love to Nellie when you see her." She crossed the room and placed the letter in her

writing-desk, that triumphant smile still transforming her face.

It might have brought comfort to Thomas' heart if he had seen her an hour or two later, for the smile had disappeared. She stood before the plush-framed photograph upon the mantel, a strange wistful wonder on her face.

"Oh, Justin," she whispered as she looked. "Oh, Justin, Justin!" She put out her hands as if for all their capable strength they felt the need of a comforting touch. And then the amiable young face smiling back at her, blurred before her wet appealing eyes.

CHAPTER IX

A DAY TO HERSELF

PERSIS had resolved on a new gown.

The livelier iris which in spring changes on the burnished dove, reveals nature's universal tactics. On looking over her wardrobe after her day at the Hornblower farm, Persis had been appalled by its manifest shortcomings. The black mohair, held to the light, betrayed an unmistakable greenish tinge. The navy blue was long since out of style. As for the wine-colored henrietta, it had never been becoming. The material had been presented Persis by a customer who had unexpectedly gone into mourning, and she had made it up and worn it with much the emotion of an old-time penitent in his hair-cloth shirt. And yet in twenty-four hours the mohair had not become perceptibly greener nor was the blue more strikingly passée. It was Persis herself who had changed.

As she stood before the mirror, fitting her own lining, she defended her course as the wisest women

will do, though when judge, jury and advocate are all one, the verdict is a foregone conclusion. She tightened the seam under her arm, used the scissors discreetly here and there, and continued to argue the point, though there was none who had a right to question or to criticize.

"It's bad policy for a dressmaker to go around shabby. It's like a doctor with an invalid wife and sickly children. And anyway, I haven't had anything new for over a year, unless I count that blue chambray wrapper. As little as I spend on clothes, I guess when I do want a new gown it's nobody's business."

The argument was plausible, convincing. Any listener who had been on the point of accusing Persis of extravagance, must have humbly acknowledged his mistake and begged her pardon. But Persis had a harder task than to convince an outsider that she needed an addition to her wardrobe. She was striving, and without success, to alter her own uneasy conviction that the prospective visit of Justin Ware was responsible for her novel and engrossing interest in her personal appearance.

Persis, studying her reflection in the mirror, directed the point of the scissors toward her throat as if deliberating suicide. "I wonder," she mused, "how

'twould look to have it turn away at the neck in a V. 'Tisn't as if I was sixty."

The scissors, obedient to the suggestion, snipped a cautious line directly beneath Persis' chin. The cambric was folded back to give the desired V-effect, and Persis' countenance assumed an expression of complacence altogether justifiable. Then at this most inopportune moment, Joel entered.

"Persis, have you seen my bottle of Rand's Remedy?" Joel had reached the stage, perhaps the most dangerous in his unceasing round, when he was ready to accept implicitly the claims made for every patent panacea. He dosed himself without mercy. He had a different pill for every hour, pills for promoting digestion, for regulating the heart action, for producing flesh. He swallowed weird powders, before and after meals. He took a wine-glass of a sticky unwholesome-looking fluid before retiring. Every periodical that came into the house he scanned for advertisements of proprietary remedies, and his manner sometimes suggested a complete willingness to contract asthma or sciatica in order to have an excuse for testing the cures so glowingly endorsed.

The spectacle of his sister, becomingly arrayed in the lining of the new gown, temporarily eclipsed the

claims of Rand's Remedy. Joel came to a jerky halt and stood open-mouthed.

"Dress-goods must be getting expensive." Having convinced himself that his eyes had not deceived him, Joel relieved his feelings by heavy sarcasm. "It's a pity you can't afford cloth enough to cover you. I guess it's true that modesty's getting to be a lost art when a woman of your age will flaunt around—"

The goaded Persis spoke to the point. "Seems to me I remember not so very long back when you were taking a constitutional out on the front lawn without much more'n a bath-towel between you and the public."

"What are you talking about?" Joel reddened angrily. "I'm a man, ain't I?"

"Well, we won't discuss that, seeing it's nothing to do with the case. But I will say that the very men who make the most fuss about women's dressing immodest, wouldn't mind riding through town on a band wagon with nothing on but a pair of tights. And I think they'd be in better business looking after the beams in their own eyes."

"That sort of thing is meant to allure." Joel pointed an accusing finger toward the V-neck. "It's

'stepping o'er the bounds of modesty,' as Shakespeare says, to entice your fellowmen."

"The jaw-bone of that ass that Samson killed a thousand Philistines with," returned Persis severely, "ain't to be compared for deadliness, it seems, with a woman's collar-bone. Looks to me as if 'twas high time to stop calling women the weaker sex when it takes so little to bring about a man's undoing. I've known plenty of foolish women in my time, but the most scatter-brained, silly girl I ever set my eyes on could see any number of men with their collars off and their trousers rolled up and not be any more allured than if she was looking at so many gate-posts. You men have certainly got to be a feeble sex, Joel. The wonder is you don't mind owning up to it."

"'Vanity of vanities,'" taunted Joel from the doorway, "'all is vanity.'" He withdrew hastily, carrying with him the uneasy conviction that he had come off second-best in the encounter. And Persis, her cheeks hot with indignation, cut the V-neck a good eighth of an inch lower than she had intended.

In spite of this inauspicious beginning, she was presently singing over her work. There was something distinctly exhilarating in the idea of devoting a week to her personal needs, keeping her custom-

ers waiting, if necessary, though she hardly thought this probable, as the season was still slack. And the elation of her mood reached its climax when Annabel Sinclair sent Diantha down to say that she wished her black net made over, and was in a hurry. Persis had heard nothing from Annabel since Diantha had worn home her first long dress. And though she had reckoned on the probability that the opening of the fall season would bring her irate patron to terms, Persis experienced vast satisfaction in returning a nonchalant reply to the peremptory message.

"Can't do a thing just now, Diantha. Next week, Friday, if your mother hasn't got anybody else—"

"Oh, she won't get anybody else, Miss Persis. Nobody else would suit her."

Diantha looked taller and more mature than ever in a plain, loosely fitting blue serge. Persis appraised it with judicial eye. "Ready made, ain't it, Diantha?"

The girl blushed tempestuously, "Yes, father bought it for me in the city. Mother said— That other dress, you know—"

"Yes, I s'pose your mother thought we'd ought to have consulted her, instead of going ahead. Well,

tell her I'm busy for the rest of this week, Diantha, and for next, up till Friday."

If this were a dismissal, Diantha failed to accept it. She perched on the arm of the big chair and watched with fascinated eyes the heavy shears biting their way through a filmy fabric of a delicate gray shade. "How pretty!" Diantha murmured. Then with more animation. "Thad West says you're the best dressmaker anywhere around here. He says that you could make lots of money in the city."

"I'm quite set up by his good opinion—seeing he knows so much about it." That Persis' dry retort veiled sarcasm was far from Diantha's thought. She continued guilelessly.

"He's got such good taste, Thad has. Don't you think men have better taste than women, Miss Persis? All women care about is following the styles, and men think whether the way you do your hair is becoming or not. If a thing isn't pretty, they don't care a bit about its being stylish."

Persis glanced up from her cutting. She had noticed this phenomenon before, the impulse of the girl who feels a proprietary interest in some particular male, to indulge in sweeping generalities concerning the opposite sex. When Persis had schemed to bring about the dramatic encounter between Thad

West and the Diantha newly emerged from the chrysalis stage, she had but one end in view; to show the young man the essential absurdity of any sentimental acquaintance between himself and the mother of this blooming maid. With a vague uneasiness she realized the possibility that she had overshot the mark.

"I think Thad dresses beautifully himself," Diantha purred on. "When you're little you can't see but what men's clothes are all alike. Isn't that funny? Now, Thad's neckties—"

There was a heavy step upon the porch, and Persis was spared further harrowing details. "Oh, it's the doctor," Diantha cried, with a sigh for her interrupted confidences. "Is anybody sick?"

"Nobody here," said Persis, and she echoed Diantha's sigh. The doctor's appearance suggested that she might be needed to act as nurse in some household too poor to pay for professional care. For a dozen years the old doctor had called on her freely for such gratuitous service, and his successor had promptly fallen into a similar practise. At this juncture Persis felt a most unchristian reluctance to act the part of ministering angel in any sick room. Nothing adds to a woman's apparent age so rapidly as working by day and caring for the sick at night.

Persis had seen herself, on more than one occasion, take on ten years in a week of such double duty. And just now she wanted to appear youthful and pretty, not haggard and worn. She greeted the doctor less cordially than was her wont for the reason that in her heart she knew she must do whatever he asked.

Doctor Ballard shook hands with Persis, nodded casually to Diantha and waited openly for that ingenuous young person to take her departure. As the door closed behind her, he dropped into the armchair she had vacated, crossed his legs and sighed.

"Miss Persis, I'm up a tree. I want some advice."

"You're welcome to all I've got." Persis, regretting the reserve of her greeting, beamed upon him affectionately.

"Did you ever know a woman to die just because she'd decided that was the proper caper?"

"Trouble?" Persis questioned laconically.

"Lord, no! Everything comfortable. Husband who worships her. As far as I can diagnose the case, it's a sort of homesickness for the pearly gates."

"Kind of as if she'd got disgusted with this world," suggested Persis, with one of her flashes of

intuition, "and wanted to get some place where things would be more congenial."

"You've hit it to a T. Now, what I want to know is this, can people keep up that kind of nonsense till they die of it? I've got a patient right now who's lost thirty pounds by it. She won't eat. She won't make an effort. She sits around smiling like an angel off on sick-leave, and the same as tells me I can't do anything for her because she's wanted over the river. Husband's about crazy."

"What's her name?"

Professional caution did not seal Doctor Ballard's lips. In many a sick room, by more than one death-bed, he and this keen-eyed woman had come to know each other with a completeness of understanding which even wedlock does not always bring. "It's Nelson Richards' wife," he said without hesitation, nor did he ask her to respect his confidence.

"Yes, I mistrusted it was Charlotte Richards. Goodness has always been Charlotte's specialty, so to speak, the kind of goodness," Persis explained carefully, "that ain't good for anything in particular. And she's lost thirty pounds?"

"I'd stake my professional reputation," said the doctor vehemently, "that nothing ails that woman

except that she thinks Heaven would be a better background for her saintliness than earth. The question is whether she can carry it to the point of suicide."

"Of course she can, if she wants to. I've seen it happen more'n once. The thing to do is to give her a reason for wanting to stay on earth—to look after things." Persis stood motionless, the hand holding the shears extended in a fashion suggesting Lady Macbeth. A spark of light illumined her meditative eyes.

"Well?" said the doctor hopefully. He recognized the signs.

"I won't say that I haven't got an idea, but it'll bear thinking about"—Persis' favorite formula. "I'll try to find time to drop in and see Charlotte."

"She doesn't need cheering, you understand," said the doctor. "She's as cheerful as the devil himself. 'A very bad night, doctor, and the palpitation is worse. This morning my Heavenly home seems very near.'" He mimicked Mrs. Richards' sanctimonious tones with a skill which won even from the abstracted Persis the tribute of a smile.

"No, I won't try to cheer her," she promised.

"Stirring up, not cheering up, is what Charlotte needs. And I don't say but what I've got an idea. I can't spare any time for a few days, though, Doctor. I need to do some sewing for myself, and I'm going to do it, come what may."

Vain boast. Persis was washing the dishes after the midday meal when Joel entered the kitchen to announce a caller. "It's the Chase girl, Mildred I think her name is. Anyway, it's the oldest one. And I guess she wants a dress made. She's got a bundle under her arm."

Persis thought this unlikely. "Those Chase girls make their own clothes and do pretty well at it, too. I've often wanted to give 'em a few hints about the shoulder seams, but except for that, they look real shipshape. And anyway, I can't do anything for a week yet. I'm going to attend to my own sewing."

Mildred Chase greeted Persis with a smile so radiant as to give a misleading impression of comeliness. She shook hands with the dressmaker, apparently struggling against an impulse to fall on her neck and kiss her. Persis, whose acquaintance with the girl was comparatively slight, viewed those indications of overmastering affection with perplexity.

Mildred did not wait to be questioned. Her volubility suggested that she could not have withheld information if she had tried.

"Oh, Miss Dale; I've got the greatest news to tell you. You'd never guess in the world. I'm going to be married."

"Well, all I can say is, Mildred, that it's not the most surprising news I ever heard," Persis answered kindly. There was something pleasant in the sight of this flushed, happy young creature who only the other day had been a dull heavy-eyed girl and soon would be a dull heavy-eyed wife. It was her little hour, her transient spring-time. Persis choked back a sigh.

Mildred was fumbling at the parcel in her lap. "I've always said one thing, that if ever I got married, Miss Dale was going to make my wedding dress. I can sew well enough for ordinary clothes, but a wedding dress is sort of special. That calls for a regular dressmaker, and there ain't but one dressmaker in Clematis that counts."

"When's the wedding to be?" Persis asked. A sudden sinking of the heart foretold the answer.

"It's a week from Saturday. It's so sudden that I can hardly believe it myself. We didn't think we could be married for a year, anyway, but Jim got

a raise unexpected. They're going to send him West, and he's bound I shall go when he does."

The parcel was unwrapped at last, its shimmering white contents contrasting with the girl's shabby dress and work-roughened hands, much as the dreams of the wedding-day contrast with the hard realities that follow. Persis looked, hesitated, thought of the filmy gray, just cut and awaiting basting, thought of the hopes that linked the present with her lost girlhood, and ended as she had always ended, by unselfish surrender.

"It's pretty goods," she said, touching it lightly with the tips of her fingers. "And—and there's nothing I like better to make than wedding clothes, my dear."

Certain important details came up for discussion, interrupted frequently by the outgushing of Mildred's artless confidences, to all of which Persis listened patiently. And when the girl took her departure, the impulse which had manifested itself on her arrival proved too strong to resist. She kissed Persis good-by, and Persis returned the kiss.

The rudimentary beginnings of a new gray gown were bundled together and tucked away to wait their fate, while Persis worked till a late hour on Mildred Chase's wedding dress. But tired as she

was, with that undercurrent of depression which sometimes most unjustly is the attendant on generous sacrifice, she found time to write a letter to a gentleman named Thompson, in care of the Hollenden Hotel, Cleveland.

"Mr. W. Thompson:

"Dear Sir—Yours received. Nothing could be further from my wish than to keep anything that belongs to somebody else, but you can understand that I don't feel like sending a young lady's letter to the first man who happens to ask for it, especially as Thompson is not what you would call an unusual name. If the young lady who wrote the letter will drop me a line asking me to forward it to you, I'll be happy to oblige her. She won't even have to write any thing but her first name, unless she likes.

"Yours truly,

"Persis Dale.

"P. S. If the young lady will tell me your full name, when she writes, it will make you a lot surer to get the letter. W. Thompson is a name that fits lots of people."

This epistolary weight off her conscience, Persis went up-stairs to bed, and for the first time in twenty years, she went without a good night to the photograph in the blue plush frame.

CHAPTER X

SHOULD AULD ACQUAINTANCE BE FORGOT

JUSTIN WARE arrived in town the day Persis finished Mildred's wedding dress. She heard the news from Joel, who had been at the station when the train came in. This was not a happy accident, nor was it intended as a spontaneous welcome to the returning son of Clematis. Year in and year out, except when the state of his health prevented, Joel kept a standing engagement with the four-twenty train, and few left town or entered it without his knowledge.

"He's filled out considerable, Justin Ware has, but except for that he hasn't changed much. Got a seal ring and silk lining to his overcoat. He ain't what you call a flashy dresser, but he lays it all over the young chaps like Thad West who think they're so swell."

Persis listened without comment. She had worked unusually hard that week, and the tired lines of her face acknowledged as much. She set

them at defiance in a peculiarly feminine fashion by dressing that evening in the unbecoming henrietta and doing her hair in the plainest, most severe fashion. At half past seven Thomas Hardin came.

"That Ware feller is going to put up at the Clematis House. He's a big bug all right. Wanted a private setting-room, he did," Thomas chuckled. "Guess he's the sort that can't remember back further than he feels like doing. Old man Ware's private setting-room was a keg o' nails in Sol Peter's store. Nobody else ever thought of taking that particular keg. Stood right back of the stove, I remember. You never caught old man Ware putting on any airs."

"Justin and me was always the best of friends," said Joel, puffing out his thin chest pompously, as if he felt himself vicariously honored by Mr. Ware's tendency to exclusiveness. "We took a shine to each other when we were little shavers. As Addison says:

> " 'Great souls by instinct to each other turn
> Demand alliance, and in friendship burn!'

"Yes, sir, it was a real David and Jonathan affair. That's his picture upon the mantel now."

Thomas Hardin turned his head. " 'Tis so," he

assented. "Hasn't changed such an all-fired lot only now he looks as if he'd cut his wisdom teeth quite a spell back." His gaze wandered to Persis, silently basting the breadths of a gray crêpe skirt. "You must have been acquainted with him, too," he said politely, striving to include her in the conversation.

"Yes, I knew him." Persis did not lift her eyes.

"All the family knew Justin," Joel explained. "Him and me being such friends, he was in and out of the house same as if he belonged here. I didn't speak to him to-day, because I never was one to cheapen myself by doing my visiting on a depot platform. We'll have plenty of chances to talk over old times.

" 'There is nothing can equal the tender hours
When life is first in bloom.' "

It seemed to Persis during the next two days that wherever she turned she heard of Justin Ware. There was no escaping the subject. Without question Justin's business methods were the acme of up-to-date effectiveness. An outbreak of war could hardly have stirred the town to more seething excitement than the advent of this well-dressed

young man with his self-confident air and full pocketbook. Clematis was apple-mad. The Apple of Eden Investment Company and its optimistic promises eclipsed in interest the combined fascinations of politics and scandal. The groups in those local lounging-places, which in rural communities are the legitimate successors of the Roman forum, passed over prospective congressional legislation and Annabel Sinclair's latest escapade in favor of apple orchards. The statistics which fell so convincingly from Ware's lips were quoted, derided, defended, denied. The hardest argument the objectors had to encounter was Ware himself. The atmosphere of prosperity surrounding him, his air of familiarity with luxury, could not be offset by logic. The program of the Clematis Woman's Club was fairly swamped by the eagerness of the members to question Mrs. Hornblower as to the possibilities of profit in this form of investment. Persis, who had come to the meeting late, went away early while the discussion was at its height and missed a paper by Gladys Wells entitled, *No Knot at the End of the Thread.*

Persis Dale was not lacking in self-respect. But for twenty years her self-respect had been identical with her loyalty. She could not fancy the one arrayed against the other. She clung desperately

to the hope that Justin would explain. For half her lifetime she had found excuses for his silence, and the habit was too strong to be smothered overnight. But even her prejudiced tenderness recognized the insufficiency of the grounds on which she had exonerated the lover of her girlhood from blame. It was no longer possible to judge his faith by her own, scorning all doubt of him as she would have scorned the grossest of temptations. She could have borne the news of his death without outward evidence of emotion, but this bewilderment and uncertainty taxed her strength almost to the breaking point. Through the days, with the help of her work, she kept herself so well in hand as almost to believe that the victory was lasting. But as the dusk settled down, the old questioning began. Would he come? Could he stay away longer? He had been in town five days without seeing her, six days, seven. Against her will and her judgment, she found herself waiting, listening, hoping. Footsteps echoed outside, lagging feet, reluctant to leave comfort behind, swift feet, hurrying to keep some tryst with joy. She heard them pass and repass while her pulses leaped with a hope she knew to be folly, and then steadied to the old monotonous beat. She grew to hate the face of the tall clock in the corner

ticking off the seconds glibly, leering as the time grew late, as if it alone knew her secret and mocked her disappointment. Thomas Hardin, coming in on one or two occasions, had exclaimed at the sight of her colorless face. Ordinarily she knew his step, but now her strained nerves misinterpreted the most familiar sights and sounds.

If the days were hard, the nights were torture. Even that poor, tormenting, futile hope that left her sick and shaken was better than hopelessness. There were no stars in the darkness that brooded over her heart after the sun went down. As she lay with clenched hands, counting the ten thousand woolly sheep whose agility in overleaping an obstructive wall is for some mysterious reason assumed to be soporific in its influence, she was conscious of a sort of terror of the thoughts lurking in ambush, ready to spring out upon her if she were off her guard for an instant. It was useless to tell herself that she was no poorer than before, that nothing had changed. In her heart she knew better. She had worked on through the gray years, facing a colorless future, without a word from her one-time lover, to tell her that he lived or ever thought of her, and yet a dream, too vague and illusory to be named hope, had been

her stay and solace. Now as she stared wide-eyed into the dark, she asked herself what was left.

It was no wonder that the gray crêpe grew apace. For the first time in her well-disciplined life, Persis gave up the struggle with refractory nerves, left her bed night after night and sewed till daybreak. For whatever might fail, her work was left, that grim consoler, who, masking benignity by a scowl, has kept ten million hearts from breaking.

The gown was finished at daybreak, one bright October morning, and that evening Persis tried it on, in the apathetic mood that mercifully relieves tense feelings when the limit of endurance has been reached. It was late, according to Clematis standards. For almost twenty-four hours that dreadful, unbeaten hopefulness would be quiescent. Thomas Hardin had come and gone. Joel was in bed. Persis Dale put on her new gray gown and scrutinized herself in the mirror. She had lost interest in her personal appearance, but her professional instinct told her that the dress was a success.

"It would be real becoming if my hair wasn't strained back so. A dress can't do much for you when you look like a skinned rabbit, all on account of your hair." She recalled the coiffure in which

Annabel Sinclair had presented herself the previous day, and loosening the coil of her hair, as glossy and abundant as ever, she imitated with a skill which surprised herself, Annabel's version of the latest mode. She was studying the effect when some one knocked.

It was quarter of nine. It occurred to Persis that some one of the neighbors must be ill. There seemed no other explanation for such a summons at that hour. She crossed the room hurriedly and opened the door.

A man stood outside, and after a moment of hesitation he entered, putting out his hand.

"Good evening, Miss Dale. I hope you haven't forgotten me."

Persis recalled afterward with the amazement self-discovery so frequently entails, that the one thought for which her mind had room was an intense thankfulness that she had arrayed herself in the gray dress. That emotion was infinitely removed from vanity. The new gown had become an armor. Except for its aid she would have been at too great a disadvantage in this encounter.

The hand she extended was quite steady. "Of course I haven't forgotten you, Justin. Won't you sit down?"

Justin pulled up a chair for her before seating himself. He had an impulse to gain time, the result of being taken by surprise. This was not quite the Persis he had expected to find. In recalling that early affair of the heart with the indulgent smile its absurdity demanded, Justin's imagination had drawn an unflattering sketch of the object of his boyish devotion. But his first glance told him that Persis Dale was still a good-looking woman, with an unmistakable dignity of manner, and, surprising as it seemed, some commendable ideas as to dress. His eyes dwelt on her with approval. He really wished he had called earlier.

They talked for a little of the most obvious matters as old friends will, meeting after many years. He was less at ease than she, and asked her permission to smoke, finding the manipulation of his cigarette a help in concealing if not overcoming his unwonted sense of embarrassment. The talk turned presently to common acquaintances, dangerous ground, he realized, though he asked himself what other interest they had in common. Persis was able to give him considerable information concerning friends, some of whose very names he had forgotten. She left him to direct the conversation as he would. He reflected that she was more quiet than he would

have expected to find her, more reserved, but by no means a woman to laugh at. That had been his mistake.

He was lighting his second cigarette when he caught sight of the plush-framed photograph. He stared till his match went out, and rising, crossed the room. As he scrutinized the likeness of his callow self, he gave way to laughter, his first spontaneous expression of feeling since he entered the room.

"Upon my word, Persis," he cried gaily, using her name for the first time and seemingly unconscious that he had done so. "It's been extremely charitable of you to give this jay house-room for so long." He scratched another match, lit his cigarette and laughed again. "I wonder if I could have been such an unconscionable donkey as I looked."

Persis moved slightly in her chair, but failed to reassure him on that point.

"We really wore our hair in that style, didn't we?" he continued humorously. "And yet the thunderbolts spared us. And that classy thing in ties! By jove! Persis, you'll have to make me a present of this for old times' sake. This pretty picture of smiling innocence gets on my nerves. I shall feel easier when it has been consigned to the flames."

From the armchair Persis spoke. Her voice was low and distinct.

"Let that picture alone."

The accent of authority was unmistakable. Justin Ware turned, and stood transfixed by what he saw. Persis' cheeks were crimson, her eyes ablaze. His astonishment over the discovery that she was angry, blended with surprised admiration. Persis in a fury was almost a handsome woman.

He went back to his chair, a trifle uncertain as to the next move. He had made a study of women, too, but this country dressmaker baffled him for the moment. Her heated defense of his picture would have suggested a conclusion flattering to his vanity had it not been for the incongruous fact that seemingly her anger was directed against himself. There was a piquant flavor to the situation gratifying to his epicure's taste.

"It's good of you to stand up for the fellow, Persis. You always were kind-hearted, I remember. But really isn't this stretching charity too far? Such a Rube is meant to be laughed at. There's nothing else to do with him. And to think that he and I were one only—let's see, how many years has it been?"

"We won't talk about that picture any more."

He regarded her humorously through the haze of smoke. "And why not?"

"He's a friend of mine. I don't care to have him laughed at!"

"But you forget my relation to the gentleman, my dear Persis. If any one should be sensitive, it surely is I."

"You've nothing to do with him," Persis declared, biting off her words in peppery mouthfuls. "You're as much of a stranger to him as you are to me. We'll just let him alone. There's things enough to talk about, I should hope, without making fun of that poor boy."

"Suppose I give you one of my late photographs in exchange for the cherub with the curly locks."

"I don't want it."

Justin was a trifle taken aback. He had hardly made the offer before he had accused himself of indiscretion. To be sure Persis was taking a very proper attitude. She showed no inclination to presume on the sentimental phase of their former acquaintance. She had said distinctly that they were strangers. And yet it was as well to be guarded. The bluntness of her retort gave him an almost rueful conviction of the needlessness of caution.

The flame of Persis' anger had burned itself out almost immediately, but the red embers still glowed in her eyes, and her cheeks were hot. She changed the subject with no pretense at *finesse*: "You seen Minerva Leveridge yet?"

"I don't seem to recall any one of that name."

"She was Minerva Bacon, and she married Joe Leveridge, old Doctor Whitely's nephew. You must remember him. Quiet sort of boy with a cast in his eye."

"Oh, yes. I remember the fellow now. His name was Leveridge, was it?"

"Yes. He died six or seven years ago. He left Minerva comf'tably fixed, judging from the mourning she wore. When a widow's crêpe veil reaches to her heels it's pretty sure her husband left her some life insurance. You been to the Sinclairs' yet?"

"Why, yes." Justin looked a little guilty. As a matter of fact he had found time to drop in to see Annabel more than once. "I met Mrs. Sinclair on the street near the hotel one afternoon, and she asked me to call."

"That's why she was in such a hurry for the net," thought Persis. Aloud she said: "Her Diantha

is an awfully pretty girl, as much of a belle as ever her mother was."

"No? I haven't happened to see the girl, but it's hard to think of Mrs. Sinclair as the mother of a grown daughter."

Ware realized with amazement that he would not again be allowed to broach the subject of the photograph. He had that fondness for playing with fire which so frequently survives in the adults of both sexes, and he gave the conversation a semi-sentimental twist more than once, only to be brought back sharply to practicalities by the lady in gray. There was no doubt that Persis meant to be mistress of the situation.

"I shall see you very soon again," he said, as he shook hands for good night. He would probably have said this in any case, such consolatory assurances being instinctive with him, but for a wonder he meant it. He had looked forward to this meeting with reluctance and had only made the call because even his complacent conscience had assured him that to omit it would be inexcusable. And virtue had been unexpectedly rewarded. He had enjoyed himself. He wanted to call again.

"Good night," said Persis, and neglected to assure

him of her pleasure in the anticipation of his speedy return. She withdrew her hand. "Good night," she repeated. And if she recalled their last parting in that very room, she was not sure whether the contrast was a ground for laughter or for tears.

CHAPTER XI

'TWIXT THE CUP AND THE LIP

THE night following Justin Ware's visit, Persis slept as soundly as a tired child. It was not that the interview had relieved her apprehensions nor in any way set her mind at rest, but after prolonged uncertainty, even the realization of one's worst forebodings may come as a relief. She slept late and rose more weary than when she went to bed. Yet in spite of that numbing sense of lassitude which clung like weights to her limbs, and for all her unaccustomed aversion to the thought of work, she knew her battle was won. Never again would she watch and listen and strangle at their birth, poor futile prayers for some assurance that a man's heart was still hers.

As if some evil spell had been broken, she recalled with pangs of self-reproach various duties she had neglected, in her unwonted self-absorption. She had not even kept her promise to Doctor Ballard to see

his obdurate patient. Persis realized how completely she had regained her poise when she chuckled over the plan which had suggested itself as she listened to Doctor Ballard's diagnosis of Mrs. Richards' ailment.

"I'm so kind of headachy and restless that my sewing's bound to be a fizzle. I'll run in to see Charlotte this afternoon. It's a shame I haven't been there before. Don't know what the doctor'll think of me."

Considering that she was merely planning a little friendly call on a sick neighbor, Persis made her toilet with surprising care. In putting up her hair she again selected Annabel Sinclair as a model. She donned the gray crêpe, a startling innovation, for in Clematis to wear a new dress on week-days, for any occasion less important than a wedding or a funeral, argued constitutional extravagance. As a final step in her preparation she rubbed her cheeks violently with a rough crash towel, the resulting brilliant complexion successfully obliterating all traces of weariness, the flotsam and jetsam of anxious days and haunted nights. And then with a jauntiness remarkable under the circumstances, Persis departed, resolved by fair means or foul to distract the thoughts of Mrs. Nelson Richards from the occu-

pancy of a reserved apartment in the Heavenly mansions.

Charlotte Richards had always been a pretty woman of that ethereal type of beauty that is not noticeably diminished by fragility. Persis, looking her over, estimated that the thirty pounds the doctor credited her with losing had been appreciably increased since he made his appeal for aid. At the same time, the dressmaker admitted with grudging admiration the effectiveness of the picture the invalid presented as she lay back in her rocking-chair, bright-colored pillows heaped about her, a slender figure in black, the wide blue eyes matched by the blue veins in the temples, and with violet shadows below. In the bright, prosaic little sitting-room she looked as out of place as a Raphael's cherub in a kindergarten, a creature unmistakably belonging to another sphere.

"Dear Persis," breathed Mrs. Richards, and extended a transparent hand. "You'll forgive my not getting up," she added gently.

"Don't mention it." Persis' ringing tones had a heartiness which seemed plebeian contrasted with Mrs. Richards' subdued murmurs. "You look the picture of comfort in that big chair. I'd hate to have you disturb yourself."

The faintest imaginable shadow crossed the other's face.

"I have very little strength, Persis. Day by day I am growing weaker. But don't think I am complaining. I am quite happy as I lie here picturing the glories of the New Jerusalem."

"I've found that rare beef was the best thing in the world for that kind of thoughts," responded Persis. "I buy the round and scrape it. You can take it raw if it's ice-cold, but I like it best made into a ball and just scorched on both sides, enough to heat it through."

The invalid's smile was distinctly superior.

"You are trying to encourage me, Persis, but you have nursed too many of the sick not to see that I'm very near the river. Earthly remedies are of no avail," declared Mrs. Richards, who had the constitutional incapacity of numberless people to speak of death and the hereafter, and yet remain simple and unaffected. "But I do not find the thought depressing. Far from it. My heart is light when I think of the joys that await me."

"I didn't know but on your husband's account you'd feel like making an effort."

Mrs. Richards sighed.

"Poor Nelson! Yes, my heart bleeds when I

think of Nelson left in his loneliness. But it won't be for long. He will soon follow me."

Persis elevated her brows.

"Well, no, Charlotte. Don't deceive yourself about that. Nelson will feel your going, and for a time he'll take on something terrible. But he won't die of it. He comes of good long-lived stock, Nelson does, and though he's no boy, he's likely got twenty-five or thirty years ahead of him. And that brings me around to what was in my mind when I came over."

She relapsed into silence, studying a figure in the carpet, and apparently not quite certain how to continue. "Well?" questioned Mrs. Richards, and for the first time during the interview there was a querulous note in her voice.

"It's about Nelson's future. Of course, as far as you're concerned, there's no reason to worry. There's some folks that are naturally constituted to enjoy Heaven, and there's others who seem to belong to this earth. Nelson's one sort and you're another." This time her pause was protracted.

"Well?" Mrs. Richards prompted feverishly. "Go on."

"I really don't know, Charlotte. Maybe I've been

a little mite impulsive speaking out this way. Perhaps I'd better not say anything more."

"Anything more? You haven't said anything yet, as far as I can see," returned Mrs. Richards tartly. "Don't be mysterious, Persis."

"Well, for some days now, I've been deliberating opening up my mind to you. They do say that folks that are kind of on the border-line between the two worlds, can see things plainer than other people. But I won't say another word unless I get your solemn promise that what I tell you don't go any further."

"Of course I shall respect your confidence, Persis." Mrs. Richards swallowed impatiently. "I always tell Nelson everything, but except for him—"

"But Nelson's the very last one I want to hear this. Never mind, Charlotte. I see it was a crazy idea, my coming over this afternoon. I don't know what got into me. We won't talk about it any more. Did those dahlias grow in your garden, Charlotte? They're the finest I've seen this year."

"Persis Dale, you certainly can be an aggravating woman when you try. What about Nelson?"

"Do you promise you'll never breathe a word to any soul alive, least of all to Nelson himself?"

Mrs. Richards hesitated. But curiosity was not altogether foreign to her saintly nature, and Persis' reluctance to impart the confidence naturally increased her desire to hear it. "I promise," she agreed, with an effort to keep the eagerness out of her voice.

"Well, then, this is what I was coming at. Of course I see that as you lie here you're bound to be thinking about Nelson, and worrying over what's going to become of him while you're enjoying yourself on the other side."

"That is all arranged," Mrs. Richards interrupted. "His sister Hetty is coming to keep house for him."

"Hetty's no kind of companion for Nelson. He's a man who likes cheerful company, and Hetty's what I call a natural widow. You know some folks are born that way. They kind of hang crêpe on everything they touch. Hetty drizzles tears as easy as a sponge."

"Well, really, Persis, as long as Nelson and I are satisfied with the arrangement I don't know as you have any call to trouble yourself."

Persis met the invalid's irritated protest with an air of disarming frankness.

"Of course you wouldn't see, and that's just what I'm coming at. I suppose Nelson has told you that

he and I had a little boy and girl affair when we was both of us too young to know our own minds."

Mrs. Richards' incredulous gasp indicated with sufficient clearness that she had not been favored with her husband's confidence regarding that chapter in his past.

"You and Nelson?"

"Yes. Now, I don't mean, Charlotte, that we was ever engaged. Mother thought I was too young to have steady company, and Nelson was just a boy, and he took her snubbings to heart more'n he would have done if he'd been older."

"He's always given me to undersand," said the wife with dignity, "that I was the only woman he ever cared for."

"I guess they generally say that, don't they, Charlotte? It's kind of like the 'honor and obey' in the marriage service. Women say it when they know they *can't* honor and they *won't* obey. It's just a form. But as far as Nelson goes," explained Persis thoughtfully, "I dare say he could fix that up with his conscience without any trouble, seeing our sweethearting never got beyond a few kisses at the gate. He did give me a ring once, but 'twas nothing but carnelian. Land! Who'd think of that twice?"

Mrs. Richards, breathing hard, had no comment to offer on that delicate point.

"Now the case is just this." Persis spoke briskly. "After you're dead and gone, Nelson's bound to marry again. A widower just can't help himself. What with all the women scheming to catch him, he's got about as much chance as a potato-bug turned loose in a chicken-yard. Queer thing, the difference between bachelors and widowers," mused Persis, straying temporarily into generalizations. "By the time a bachelor's as old as Nelson, the women have kind of given up on him. But if a man's been married once it proves that he's got a soft spot somewhere, and all that's needed is for them to keep on trying till they find it. But as I was saying, Charlotte, I thought that it might ease your mind to know that he ain't going to be allowed to throw himself away. While I don't want to seem boastful about it, I don't mind saying to you that there's not another woman in the town who would stand any show alongside me, if Nelson was free to pick and choose. And I'll give you my solemn promise that he shan't put anybody in your place that you'd be ashamed to acknowledge for your husband's second wife."

Forgetting her pitiful lack of strength, Mrs. Richards sat erect, her hollow cheeks aflame.

"Persis Dale, have you got the nerve to sit there and tell me to my face that you're going to set your cap for my husband after I'm dead?"

"Now lie down, Charlotte, till I explain." Persis' soothing tone suggested readiness to excuse the natural peevishness of an invalid. "You mustn't go to exciting yourself, and hastening the end."

Mrs. Richards promptly resumed her recumbent position.

"I've talked plain to you, Charlotte," Persis said, "because you're not of the same clay as most women. You've always been wrapped up in celestial things since you was a girl. But a woman can't live with a man as long as you've lived with Nelson and not feel responsible for him. And I've told you this so there won't be a single shadow on your mind these last days. I'll look out for Nelson." She spoke with the air of one accepting a sacred trust.

"I never heard of such a thing," breathed Mrs. Richards from the pillows.

"Of course while you were living, Charlotte," Persis continued, as if the release so cheerfully anticipated by the invalid had already been consum-

mated, "I never should have allowed myself to think of Nelson twice. But I own I've blamed my mother more than once for sending him about his business the way she did. Nelson is a man in a thousand, steady and affectionate and a careful provider. If he's been so good to you, Charlotte, just think what the second wife has reason to expect!"

In muffled tones Mrs. Richards confided to the pillow that never in all her life—and seemed unable to proceed further.

"Well, I must be going." Suiting the action to the words, Persis rose. "Send for me any time, Charlotte. Ever since I heard about your state of health, I've felt drawn to you, same as if you were a sister. Mind, I'll drop my sewing and everything any time you want me. And as for Nelson's future, don't you give yourself an anxious thought about that."

"Good-by," said Mrs. Richard's faintly, and closed her eyes. And with a commiserative glance in which lurked a spice of humor, Persis withdrew. At the door she encountered Nelson Richards hurrying home early from his work to spend as much time as possible with his wife. Anxiety had left its signature on Nelson's jovial face. He walked with dragging step and drooping shoulders, apprehension

counterfeiting age. But at the sight of Persis he roused himself from his customary abstraction.

"Hello, Persis. Well, I declare you're a sight for sore eyes." He regarded her with frank admiration, an unconscious tribute to the effectiveness of the gray crêpe. "Looks like you was renewing your youth," he continued with heavy gallantry. "Ain't seen you look so handsome since you was sixteen."

Persis had not invented the episode of Nelson's boyish admiration. In all important details she had held rigidly to the truth, though it is doubtful whether those innocent, sexless kisses at the gate had been recalled in the past dozen years by either party to the transaction. But it was true that Nelson Richards had always had a warm spot in his affections for his first sweetheart, and the cordiality of his greeting was by no means perfunctory.

Persis smiled upon him kindly.

"Thank you, Nelson. Wish I could say as much for you, but to tell the truth, you look to me a little peaked."

"Well, I have felt better." He lowered his big voice discreetly. "Fact is I'm worried pretty near to death over Charlotte. What do you think about her, Persis? Doctor says he don't find nothing out of

shape with her organs. Looks as if she'd ought to pick up, don't it?"

He swallowed hard as he put the question, his eyes eloquent with dumb misery, and Persis laid a friendly hand upon his arm as she answered with reassuring certainty: "Don't you worry, Nelson. I feel it in my bones that Charlotte's going to be better before long."

"I'd as soon take your say-so as any doctor's." The big man looked at her gratefully. "Come in as often as you can, Persis. There ain't nobody we'd rather see."

He tramped into the house, armed in his splendid masculine obtuseness, stooped to kiss his wife's hot cheek, and said, as was inevitable, the last thing he should have thought of saying.

"Saw Persis Dale out here just now, and I'll be darned if she ain't getting better looking every day."

"I can't see that that's enough to excuse profanity," said Mrs. Richards witheringly. "Persis Dale is a coarse scheming creature." Then as her husband burst into astonished protests, she showed signs of hysteria.

"Oh, of course you'll stand up for her. I wouldn't have expected anything else. You go out to the ice-chest, Nelson Richards, and heat up that cup of

beef tea you set away last night." Left to herself she lay back upon the pillows, gazing at the ceiling with vindictive eyes.

"As long as she hasn't got the decency to wait till I'm in my grave," said Mrs. Richards tearfully, "I'll fool her. I'll show her there's many a slip 'twixt the cup and the lip."

CHAPTER XII

A CONFESSION TOO MANY

PEOPLE were talking. That system of wireless telegraphy which ante-dates Marconi's invention by ten thousand generations, had done effective service. In the remotest farm-houses it was known that Justin Ware had called on Persis Dale twice within a week. He came between half past eight and nine, so said reliable rumor, and the lateness of the hour of his arrival as well as of his departure, made only too plain the relaxing influence of city life on coutry-bred standards.

Annabel Sinclair heard and turned faint and sick, so closely does jealousy counterfeit love. As far as Justin Ware was concerned, the news of his untimely death would have affected Annabel less than the information that the chops had not been sent from the butcher's in time for dinner. But he was a man and that he should choose to spend two evenings in a week with another woman, after she had given him to understand that his society would be

agreeable to herself, argued a decline in her powers of fascination. She told herself that she hated Persis, that she hated Justin, that she loathed life and the miserable business of being a woman, and she ended by finding pretexts for daily excursions past the Clematis House, always arrayed in the most fetching street costumes. When on the third day she encountered Justin, that gentleman responded gallantly to her pensive tender reproach. His was no Jericho heart, to demand a seven-day siege. He had found Persis Dale unexpectedly interesting, but Annabel was unexpectedly pretty, and a liking for pickles does not preclude a taste for sweets.

Thomas Hardin's married sister, Mrs. Gibson, heard the news with consternation. She had long been aware of the state of her brother's affections, this indeed arguing no especial insight, since an infant in arms would have possessed sufficient intuition to read the heart of the guileless Thomas. Mrs. Gibson had regarded Persis in the proprietary light of a prospective sister-in-law, even going so far as to criticize her with the frank freedom which is the prerogative of kinship. When the first rumor of Justin's attentions reached the good woman's ears, she made a hurried trip to town for the sole purpose of interviewing her brother.

As good luck would have it, business was slack at the moment of her arrival, and Thomas left two lanky country-women to the care of his assistant, and followed his sister to a dingy space in the rear which, primarily serving as a store-room, was also by virtue of a certain gloomy privacy, peculiarly adapted to the discussion of a subject of such delicacy.

Mrs. Gibson dusted a chair with needless ostentation and then focused her regard on her brother who stood before her a self-confessed culprit, conscious guilt as manifest in his attitude as in the flaming confusion of his face.

"Thomas, what's this I hear about Persis Dale?"

"I don't know, Nellie. What have you heard?"

Mrs. Gibson's glance expressed her scorn of the evasion.

"Is it true that Justin Ware is going with her?"

"Why, I've heard, Nellie, that he's been over there once or twice. Old friend of Joel's," explained Thomas, with a futile effort to speak convincingly.

"Fiddlesticks! If I thought you really believed that any man would walk from the Clematis House out to the Dale place for the sake of hearing Joel Dale talk about the latest cure-all, I'd be ashamed

to own you for my brother. If he goes, he goes to see Persis. Now, what do you mean to do about it?"

"Nellie, I haven't any right to interfere. If she wants Justin Ware's company it's her own business. She's not beholden to me."

"No," snapped Mrs. Gibson. "And why ain't she? Because you've been shilly-shallying along as though 'twas her business to pop the question. You men are getting nowadays so you can't do a thing for yourselves, you just hang back and leave us women to do it all."

Thomas squirmed like an impaled beetle. "Guess I'd better go back into the store, Nellie. George means well, but he hasn't much of a head-piece—"

"Thomas Hardin, you stay where you are till I'm done with you. Now tell me straight. Have you ever asked Persis Dale to marry you?"

"Well, Nellie, to be candid, I never have got really to the point. I want her to know the worst about me first. I wouldn't take her in for all the world, and then have her sorry afterward."

"Take her in! Of course, you'll take her in. If all men stopped for that, weddings would have gone out of fashion long ago. And it's well for women's peace of mind that they don't have to know the

worst about the men they marry. I'm ashamed of you, Thomas! To think you've got no more gumption than to stand around like a ninny and let that city man walk off with the woman you've always wanted."

"If she'd rather marry Justin Ware," Thomas began and failed to finish his sentence, his voice strangled by his inward anguish. His sister snorted.

"Good lord! Thomas, a woman's going to marry the man that asks her. By all accounts that Ware won't be mealy-mouthed. If he wants her, he'll not stand back and let another man have the first say."

There was a reasonableness in this presentation of the case which impressed Thomas as his air of irresolution showed.

"Then you think I've got a chance, Nellie?"

His sister groaned her exasperation. "You had all the chance till this Ware turned up. Of course when a woman's got a choice it makes a difference. But there's nothing gained by holding off and letting him have everything his own way. If you don't ask her, of course she'll take him, provided she gets the chance. And if you do ask her, she may take you. So you won't lose anything by trying."

As a result of this plain unflattering counsel, Thomas Hardin dressed that evening with unusual

care, and with the approach of darkness turned his face toward his familiar goal, his emotions befitting a participant in the charge of the Light Brigade. His throat was parched, his heart hammered. While absolutely certain that Persis was aware of his aspiration, the thought of expressing it, of making a formal offer, was distinctly terrifying. And moreover there was a disagreeable preliminary that must receive attention, the confession of another of those misdemeanors of his past, as irrepressible a brood as hounded poor Macbeth. The episode dated back to his twentieth year, when Annabel Sinclair was just waking up to the knowledge of her beauty and the power it gave her over the susceptible sex. Thomas blushed to reeall how ignominiously he himself had capitulated.

Fate was on his side that evening. Joel was absent. Persis was kind. She sat by the lamp stitching, and the inevitable suggestion of comfortable domesticity was in itself an inspiration. He thanked Heaven for her lowered gaze, confident that if he were forced to meet her candid eyes, he should never find courage to begin.

"Persis, there's something I want to tell you. It ain't pleasant to speak about it, but I think it's one of the things that ought to be said before—I mean

I'd be a good deal easier in my mind if you knew all about it."

"I don't believe it's anything so very bad, Thomas," Persis said with unaccustomed gentleness.

"Well, I don't know. She was so pretty and cute that it sort of went to my head, but that's no excuse."

"Who was pretty?"

Persis let her work fall. Her eyes met her lover's with a challenge that did not tend to lessen Thomas's confusion.

"Well, Persis, you've a right to know. Of course I wouldn't mention it to anybody else. Not that she was a mite to blame," interpolated Thomas with instinctive chivalry, "for it was all my fault from start to finish. It—it was Stanley Sinclair's wife."

Absorbed as he was in relieving his conscience of its intolerable load, it did not occur to Thomas to emphasize the fact that on the occasion when he had played so culpable a part, Annabel still bore her maiden name. It was a good two years before the dignified Stanley Sinclair had recognized in the giddy, shallow, little beauty, the fitting mate for his staid maturity. And that his failure to make this point clear might lead to a serious misapprehension

on Persis' part, failed to present itself as a possibility to the honest blunderer.

"Well?" Persis' tone was crisply interrogative. "What happened?"

"Why, she looked so like a kitten, Persis, that you can't hardly help petting, that I put my arm around her. And I—" He cleared his throat, his eyes, fortunately for his resolution, fixed upon the floor. "Well, I might as well make a clean breast of it. I did kiss her. Of course I ought to be ashamed—"

"Yes." Persis agreed icily. "You ought."

She had listened with a sort of sickened revolt to Thomas' stammered confession. Nothing that Annabel Sinclair could do would surprise her, nor did she wonder when boys of Thad West's age yielded to her lure. But that this man, this staid, stanch Thomas, on whom she had counted more implicitly than she knew, should have proved so easy a victim shook her native faith in humankind. "All men are alike," thought Persis, in her haste betrayed into one of those sweepingly unjust generalizations such as King David penitently acknowledged.

Thomas' eyes came up from the carpet at her

tone. He looked at her with a sort of terror. The fixed sternness of her face made her seem a stranger. Little as he had relished the idea of acknowledging his bygone weakness, he had not dreamed of a result like this.

For a moment he gazed at her with dumb appeal, then faltered: "I was—was afraid you'd be disgusted with me, Persis."

"I am."

He swallowed hard as if her answer were a mouthful that resisted mastication. For a little they sat silent. Persis picked up her work and resumed her sewing with a brave show of indifference though the seam ran into a blur before her eyes. And at last Thomas spoke.

"I'm sorry you take it this way, Persis, but it couldn't be helped. I had to clear up things before—I didn't feel it would be fair to ask you anything that would bind you till you knew the worst about me. And now—"

There was another long silence. Then Thomas found himself upon his feet, feeling for his hat, groping like a blind man.

"Good-by, Persis. I wish I'd been a better man. But the fact is I ain't fit to tie your shoe-strings, and that ends it. Good-by."

He held out his hand, a formality unprecedented. She realized that he meant it for good-by, not good night. Some perversity kept her eyes upon her work, her hands occupied.

"Good-by, Thomas."

The door creaked ajar. There was a pause. It closed reluctantly. She heard him stumble at the steps, go haltingly down the path. She stabbed the fabric in her hand with her needle as if that minute tool had been a weapon.

"Men are all alike," repeated Persis, the tears running down her cheeks. "But there's a difference in women. And the Annabel Sinclair kind, with brains enough to keep 'em from being downright bad and not enough conscience to make 'em good, are the worst of the lot. If the devil couldn't count on their help in laying traps for good men, he'd be dreadful handicapped."

She swept the tears from her cheeks with a swift gesture, swallowed those which had not yet fallen and fell to sewing frantically for there were steps outside. But the late caller was not Justin Ware as for the moment she had feared, but Mrs. West entering with the ponderous dignity inseparable from two hundred pounds avoirdupois. Persis rose hastily and pulled forward the big armchair,

her action due to a well-grounded fear for her furniture in addition to the impulse of her native courtesy.

"Set down, Mis' West. You're looking first-rate."

"If I am it's more than I feel," the stout woman returned in a hollow voice. "I'm so worried about Thad that I wonder there's anything left of me."

Persis, politely forbearing to call attention to the fact that enough of Mrs. West remained for all practical purposes, regarded her friend with kindly concern. "My, is Annabel Sinclair pestering that boy yet? I thought—"

"Persis, it's not Annabel now. It's the young one—Diantha."

"Oh!" Persis resumed her sewing, with heightened color.

"Yes. I used to think he was as crazy about that woman as anybody could well be, but that wasn't to be named in the same day with the state he's in now. He goes around as if he was in a sort of daze. Sometimes I have to ask him three times over if he'll have another helping of pie."

"Well, it may not be sensible, Mis' West, but it's nature. I guess there's nothing to do except put up with it."

"But, Persis, she's so young."

"She's younger than her mother, that's sure. And that's in her favor."

"And she's Annabel Sinclair's daughter."

"Well, that's better'n if she was somebody's wife."

"It's easy for you to make light of it, Persis. But if he was your boy—" Mrs. West produced a voluminous handkerchief from about her person, hid her face in its folds and sobbed.

"If he was my boy, Mis' West, I guess I'd act as foolish as other mothers. But seeing he ain't, I can look at the affair kind of detached and sensible. I don't suppose you're especially set up over the idea of Diantha Sinclair for a daughter-in-law, but if mothers picked out wives for their sons, there'd be mighty few girls who'd pass muster, and the balance would have to settle down to be old maids."

"It isn't that I don't think anybody's good enough for Thad," said Mrs. West in hasty disclaimer. "I can see his faults fast enough."

"Yes, you can see his faults, and you can excuse 'em, too. That's what being a mother means. And you can see Diantha's faults, and you can't excuse 'em without a struggle. Yet she's as pretty as a pink, and a sweet-dispositioned girl, too. She's a long ways yet from being a woman, but as far as I can see, she's started in the right direction."

"I'd hate to think of my Thad leading the life Stanley Sinclair's had to for the last fifteen years," said Mrs. West with feeling.

"Well the cases ain't the same. When youth mates with youth, there's hopes of them learning their lessons together and not making such hard work of it, either. But what can you expect when a man along in the forties decides it's time for him to settle down, and ties himself up to some giddy young thing, so brimful of life that it's all she can do to keep her toes on the ground. It's like hitching up a colt with some slow-going old plug from a livery stable. You drive 'em that way, and either the colt's spirit is going to get broken, or else the plug will travel at a good deal faster clip than he likes."

Mrs. West's attention had plainly wandered during Persis' homily.

"Beats all how that girl grew up all in a minute, so to speak," she said irrelevantly.

Persis gave her entire attention to her work.

"It don't seem any time since I was here and she came in to ask about some sewing of her mother's. Her dress was up to her knees, and her hair hanging in curls. Except for being tall she looked about

ten years old. And the next thing anybody knows, she's a young lady with all the airs and graces."

Persis preserved a guilty silence.

"I didn't know but you might have some idea," Mrs. West suggested hopefully. "You know you agreed to see what you could do about Annabel, and then Thad got tired of her all at once, so there wasn't any call for you to interfere."

With a determined shake of her head, Persis declined the new commission.

"No, Mis' West. I'm not going to have a finger in this pie, and I advise you to let the young folks alone. If you don't want him to marry her, your one chance is to leave 'em be. And if they do make a match of it, either one might have done worse."

While Persis gave no hint to her caller of her own complicity in the situation Mrs. West deplored, at the bar of her own conscience she made no effort to disclaim the responsibility. It helped to ease the hurt due to the revelation of Thomas' weakness to busy her thoughts with other people.

"If they do take each other it's got to be for better instead of worse. I made that match without meaning to, but as long as I had a hand in it, I'm going to see that both of 'em behave."

CHAPTER XIII

THE MAIL BAG

"I SHOULD 'most think you'd have to give up the dressmaking business or else hire a secretary. It takes considerable time to attend to such a correspondence as you're getting to have."

Joel slammed a bunch of letters down upon the table, his ill-temper expressing itself as naively as that of a child. Nor was its occasion a mystery to his sister. Numerous letters marked the recipient as an individual of consequence. Joel's mail was limited to communications from the distributors of quack remedies to whom he had communicated his symptoms in accordance with instructions set forth in their benevolently inquisitive advertisements. When Persis received several letters on the same mail, the possibility that he might be a person of secondary importance in the establishment presented itself to Joel with disquieting force.

"Like enough they're from some of my customers

asking when I can spare 'em a little extra time," Persis suggested soothingly.

"No, they ain't. Least ways some of 'em are from men. And I must say, Persis, it don't look well, your carrying on a correspondence with two or three men-folks and your own brother not know anything about it. As the poet says:

"'A lost good name is ne'er retrieved.'

"Who's this that's writing you from the Clematis House, anyway?"

"I haven't looked to see," Persis replied dryly, but her comely face took on color.

"Looks bad when a man right in the same town's ashamed to say what he's got to say to your face. Has to seal it up in an envelope. If you were a little readier to ask advice, Persis, it would be better for you. You women, sheltered and guarded all your lives, ain't expected to know much about the world, and if you just won't seek counsel from them that's able to give it, of course some unscrupulous rapscallion is going to make fools of you."

"Well, Joel," Persis promised with unimpaired good humor, "if I ever get in a tight place where I need your advice, I'll ask for it." But she made

no move to investigate the contents of the promising pile upon the table, and without attempting to mask his umbrage, Joel withdrew his offended dignity to the porch. Even then, in splendid refutation of the theory that curiosity is the cardinal vice of her sex, Persis completed the task on which she was engaged before putting herself in a position to answer Joel's inquiry as to the identity of the correspondent using the stationery of the Clematis House.

It was her first letter from that source for many a year and she scrutinized the address long and thoughtfully. "I shouldn't even have known his handwriting. If anybody'd told me that six months ago, I'd have laughed in his face." But now instead of laughing she sighed, and her face remained grave throughout the reading of the communication.

"Dear Persis—I am unexpectedly called out of town and shall not be able to see you Thursday as I had expected. I do not think, however, that I shall be away more than six weeks or two months at the longest. There are some good business prospects here, which I have not as yet brought to a satisfactory termination, but apart from that, the temptation to see more of my old friends is too strong to be resisted.

"Sincerely yours,

"J. M. W."

"I guess he means the Hornblowers, by 'business prospects,'" mused Persis, and replaced the letter in its envelope. For Mrs. Robert Hornblower's anticipations of a life of luxurious ease had been temporarily thwarted by the unexpected and unprecedented opposition of her hitherto compliant husband. Even a worm will turn. Robert Hornblower, after a lifetime of meek submission, had suddenly become contumacious and unruly. The wifely authority, exercised so long under another name, had as yet been powerless to bring him to the point of disposing of his farm. The man had aged under the strain, had lost flesh and color, along with sleep and appetite, and yet to the surprise of his acquaintances and his own secret amazement, he had proved that he had a will of his own by stubbornly reiterating his refusal to be coerced into acting against his best judgment. And while Mrs. Hornblower was confident of ultimate victory, it was not easy for her to forgive her husband for delaying in so unjustifiable a fashion their entrance into the Promised Land.

The second letter to receive Persis' attention was addressed in a hand which, like Justin's, seemed hauntingly familiar. Persis studied the post-mark

with the result of piquing her curiosity, rather than satisfying it.

"Warren, New York. First time I ever heard of that place to my knowledge. Beats all how folks can know your name, when you hadn't even found out that their town was on the map." With a mounting and pleasurable sense of her own importance, Persis opened the letter and looked first at the signature of the writer. Then with an exclamation of interest, she gave herself to the perusal of the communication, forgetting Justin Ware for the moment as completely as if he had never existed.

"My Dear Miss Dale—A friend of mine, Mr. Washington Thompson, has asked me to write requesting you to forward him at once a letter of mine which has come into your possession though I am at a loss to understand how. I have told Mr. Thompson that after all this time the letter is perfectly worthless, but he does not seem to be of that opinion. Accordingly I am troubling you by this request. Mr. Thompson will be at the Munroe Hotel, Cincinnati, from the twelfth to the fifteenth, and for the week following at the Hollenden Hotel, Cleveland.

"Yours truly,

"Enid Randolph.

"Warren, New York."

Persis sprang to her feet and ran out upon the

porch. The irate Joel, nursing his wrongs in dignified silence, experienced a new sense of injury at the sight of her radiant face.

"Joel, when you happen to pass young Mis' Thompson's I want you to stop and tell her that I've got a piece of goods here that maybe belongs to her. Ask her if she'll come in the first time she's by. You might say, Joel, that I'd be much obliged if she'd make a point of coming soon, as I have a general cleaning up along about this season, and I like to get rid of all the odds and ends that are cluttering up things."

Nothing in Joel's expression indicated that he had even heard the commission, but his look of gloomy abstraction did not deceive his sister who was perfectly aware that he understood her request and would take a certain satisfaction in executing it. She returned to her mail, making short work of an advertisement of a new substitute for silk linings and another which offered a fashion periodical at bargain prices. The last letter in the pile again aroused her curiosity, for the upper left-hand corner bore the legend, "Delaney and Briggs, Attorneys at Law."

"Lawyers, too. Well, I don't blame Joel for feeling exercised." She recalled the implied threat

in a recent communication from Mr. Washington Thompson regarding the return of his property, and the thought crossed her mind that possibly he had invoked legal aid for its recovery.

She was standing as she began to read. Half-way down the page she uttered an exclamation and staggered to a chair. She finished the letter, laid it down, took it up again and reread it. Then rising, she busied herself with various tasks about the room, doing over several things she had already completed and ignoring some obvious needs. This accomplished, she read the letter for a third time and brought out her sewing. After five minutes of desultory work, she folded the garment and laid it away. For the next two hours she might have served as a study of contemplation. Her chin upon her hands, her eyes musing, she sat motionless, almost rigid, as the big clock ticked off the seconds.

Joel shuffled into the room on the stroke of twelve. "Mis' Thompson says she'll likely go by sometime to-day or to-morrow and she'll stop in."

Persis did not reply, and for the first time Joel noticed his sister's unusual attitude. He looked at her and then at the clock.

"Ain't dinner ready?"

"Dinner?"

"Yes, dinner! What ails you? You act as if you'd never heard of such a thing as meal-time."

"I didn't think it was time for dinner yet," Persis answered, rousing herself. Again Joel inspected her sharply.

"Haven't you been sewing this morning?"

"No, I did start, but I didn't feel like keeping it up."

Joel's face expressed mingled concern and amazement. That Persis should sit idle a morning from choice was extraordinary enough to be alarming. "Don't you feel well?"

"Me? Oh, yes, I'm all right." Persis went into the next room and began her preparations for the meal. It took her longer than usual. Joel watched the clock with frowning vexation, but some quality abnormal and vaguely disquieting in his sister's manner kept him from putting into words the impression that a man who is kept waiting a full hour for his dinner is hardly used.

His mood softened when at length appetizing odors diffusing themselves through the house, indicated that the pot roast of day before yesterday which under Persis' thrifty management had as many final appearances as a *prima donna,* was soon to grace the table as an Irish stew. Joel dearly loved

that savory concoction, and though he was on his guard against allowing her to suspect the fact, he privately placed his sister's dumplings on a par with Addison's poems. Forgetting both his grievance of the morning and his later anxiety, due to Persis' singular conduct, he gave himself up to cheerful anticipation.

The problem which for generations has exercised the wits of amateur debaters was settled satisfactorily in this instance, at least. The joys of anticipation far exceeded the pleasure of realization. Joel took one swallow of the stew and dropped his spoon with a splash.

"What in Sam Hill! What kind of a mess do you call this?"

Persis took a hasty sip, looked incredulous and sipped again. Slowly the shamed blood crept to the roots of her hair. Yet she spoke with a self-control fairly brazen.

"Looks as if I'd made a mistake and put in sugar instead of salt."

Joel's gaze swept the table, hawk-like in its searching eagerness.

"Where's the dumplings?"

"I—well, I declare, I forgot the dumplings."

He experienced a chill of actual terror. This was

his sister Persis, Persis the practical and reliable, this woman who sugared the stew, and allowed the *chef-d'oeuvre* of the dinner to slip her mind. He was immediately aware of a singular flush staining her cheeks, a feverish glitter in her eye.

The gentleness of his comment took her by surprise. "I guess, Persis, it was only that you was thinking of something else."

"That was it, Joel." She hesitated, then moved by his forbearance spoke out plainly. "I was thinking, Joel, how it would seem to be rich."

Again his heart jumped. Such vague vain wishing, so characteristic of many women, was absolutely foreign to his sister's temperament. He could not remember the time when she had overlooked the present satisfaction, however poor and meager, in favor of some joy of fancy.

"I wouldn't let my mind stray off to such things," he said uneasily.

"Well, Joel, I guess I'll have to face it. The fact is, you see, I *am* rich."

Her words fell like a thunderbolt, confirming his worst fears. He sat aghast, unable to decide whether Persis had lost her mind, or this was the delirium incident to some acute seizure. In tones of such unnatural gentleness that his sister started

as they fell on her ears, he offered the only suggestion which occurred to him at the moment.

"Hadn't you better go lie down, Persis?"

"Me? Why, I feel all right."

"Well, even if you do, lying down won't hurt you. It's the best thing known to lengthen life. You'd ought to take better care of yourself, Persis. Half an hour a day—"

His sister interrupted him with a burst of laughter in which his preternaturally acute senses detected the wildness of mania.

"Joel, I know what ails you. You think I'm taking leave of my senses. It does sound that way, I own, for a Dale to be talking about being rich. I don't mean the Vanderbilt kind of riches, you know, but a nice little income so I can keep a servant girl and never do any more sewing and maybe buy an automobile."

"Persis Dale," exclaimed Joel, "you're as crazy as a June bug."

"Look for yourself, then." Persis turned to the secretary where she had placed the letter she had received that morning. She felt more like herself than at any time since she had perused the contents of that final astonishing communication. In combatting Joel's incredulity, she was able to set at rest

certain disquieting doubts of her own as to her sanity.

Joel's jaw dropped as he read. "Mrs. Persis Ann Crawford. Why, that must mean Aunt Persis."

"Sure. The one I was named for. And I guess it's a good twenty-five years since we've had a line from her." She laughed a little hysterically, dabbing her eyes with her handkerchief. "I don't s'pose I'm crying because she's dead, seeing I took it for granted that she'd passed away years ago. And yet all the time to leave me her money. Ain't life the funniest mix-up. Yesterday I couldn't have afforded so much as a sick-headache. And now if I want a run of typhoid fever or my appendix cut out, it's nobody's business."

Joel laid down the letter with a gulp. The impression uppermost in his mind was the singular blindness of fortune in selecting the recipients of its bounty.

"It's a good deal of a responsibility for a woman," he said ruefully. "Seeing I'm the oldest, it's rather odd Aunt Persis Ann didn't realize that I was the proper one to inherit. But I guess she thought it was all in the family, and you'd be guided by my advice."

Persis' answer was irrelevant. "Joel, seems to me that so far my life's been for all the world like a checked gingham, if you know what I mean."

But Joel did not know. "Checked gingham! I never heard such crazy talk."

"Made up of the same little things, all just alike," Persis explained patiently. "And nothing especially bright or cheerful about any of 'em. I've a feeling as if I'd like a splash of color now, velvet as green as grass and fire-red satin."

"Sounds as if you had the Scarlet Woman in mind," Joel said disapprovingly, and before Persis had time to explain, young Mrs. Thompson had knocked. She was a sorry figure for a wife of less than a year's standing, a drooping little woman, pale, listless and heavy-eyed.

"Mr. Dale said something about your having a piece of my goods," she explained with such an effect of indifference that Persis wondered she had taken the trouble to call. Then her gaze went to the table and the untouched meal. "I'm afraid I've interrupted you."

"Not a mite, Mis' Thompson. Walk right in! Joel!" Persis' authoritative glance in her brother's direction indicated the propriety of his withdrawal.

Joel rose reluctantly. It was not a fitting that was in prospect nor even a discussion of styles where questions might arise which could not suitably be debated before one of the opposite sex. But since Persis only wished to return the young woman a piece of goods that had been overlooked when her dress was sent home, Joel felt not unreasonably that he might have witnessed the transaction without offending the most rigid notions of what was seemly.

Persis searched in her piece-bag and produced an infinitesimal scrap of green voile. Young Mrs. Thompson accepted the offering with evident surprise.

"Yes, that's my goods," she acknowledged. "But it's so little, I don't see how I can use it."

"You never can tell when a scrap like that will come in useful," Persis declared convincingly. "And by the way, Mis' Thompson, I wonder if your husband happens to have handy that ridiculous letter that was meant for another Thompson."

The worthless scrap of green dropped from the young wife's shaking hands. "Why, what makes you think—"

"That letter," Persis explained steadily, "was

written to a Mr. Washington Thompson. I don't wonder he shortens it to a W., do you? To have Washington for your first name must be a good deal like having the Washington monument in your front yard, sort of overpowering. Of course, as Enid says—Enid's the girl, you know—a love-letter as old as that ain't of no real use. Love-letters and eggs are a good deal alike. You can keep 'em in cold storage month in and month out, but while they don't exactly spoil, they ain't the same as fresh ones."

Persis was talking to give the little woman time. From the pigeonholes of her secretary she produced the letters she needed, and meanwhile kept a wary eye upon the camphor bottle, always within reach for the benefit of sensitive patrons likely to succumb to the ordeal of fitting. To judge from young Mrs. Thompson's colorless face, she might need it at any moment.

"I own I kind of interfered with what was none of my business," Persis acknowledged with as pleasing a frankness as if such interferences were not in line with her normal activities. "But I kind of worried over having a love-letter wandering around that way and not getting where it belonged. That might make lots of trouble."

"But who was 'Her'?" demanded young Mrs. Thompson wildly. And Persis, whose sense of responsibility for her kind extended even to her unknown correspondents, looked grave as she answered.

"Dearie, I don't know. But I'm sure of one thing, that it wasn't you. Here's his letter to me, madder'n a wet hen, he was, too. And here's hers. You see it's the same writing as the one your husband has; I'm glad she wrote her name right out plain, because I said particular that the 'Enid' would be enough."

Then Persis dropped both letters and caught Mrs. Thompson in her arms. The younger woman was small and slender, and under the stress of excitement Persis lifted her to the couch as easily as if she had been a child. Then she sprinkled the white face with water from the pitcher on the table and brought the camphor bottle into play, all the time murmuring words of endearment and sympathy whose restorative effect was possibly not second to that of her other remedies. Young Mrs. Thompson returned to consciousness to hear herself called a "lamb" and a "poor dear." She opened her heavy eyes and gave back a rapturous smile to the other woman's comprehending gaze.

"I—I don't believe I ever was so happy," murmured young Mrs. Thompson. "Then he did leave it in his pocket just for a joke. And, oh, dear Miss Dale, if it's a girl I'm going to call her Persis."

CHAPTER XIV

AN ACQUISITION

THE Dale homestead was undergoing repairs. For years Persis had patched up the roof when it leaked and papered with her own hands such rooms as had become too dingy to be longer tolerated. Now she was giving free rein to her exuberant fancy in the matter of improvements. A telephone had been installed in the house the day following the communication from the legal advisers of the late Persis Ann Crawford and this in spite of Joel's passionate protests.

"May be a hoax for all you know. Better wait till the money's in your hand before you run into extravagance piling up debts for us to work off later. I guess it's a true saying that if you put a beggar on horseback, he'll ride to the devil."

Within a week the innovations had reduced him to a condition of disapproving dumbness. Paperhangers and plasterers had taken possession of the old house. The roof was being reshingled. The

new electric lights gave to each successive evening an air of festive brilliancy. The sagging porch was in process of reconstruction. It was the dull season from the builder's standpoint, and Persis had no difficulty in securing workmen in sufficient numbers to hurry the work with what seemed to herself, as well as to Joel, almost magical despatch. A generous check deposited to her credit in the Clematis Savings Bank had relieved Joel's earlier apprehensions. The bequest was no hoax. But his constitutional parsimony rebelled against the outlay as if each expenditure had meant want in the future. While his dignity demanded that he should cease the protests that were disregarded, his air of patient martyrdom expressed his sentiments with all the plainness of speech.

The feminine half of the population of Clematis was in despair. For Persis Dale had announced with every indication of finality that after she had finished the gowns in hand, her career as dressmaker would immediately terminate. Mrs. Robert Hornblower, bitter because Persis' fortune had materialized before her own, commented freely on the fact that Persis Dale hadn't the strength of mind to come into money without beginning to put on airs. Mrs. Richards, who was so far convalescent that

she had been able to attend divine worship the previous Sabbath, rolled her eyes Heavenward and deplored the effects of pomps and vanities on certain constitutions. Even so true and tried a friend as Mrs. West was driven to remonstrate.

"I don't say that you ought to work the way you've done all your life, Persis, rushing from one dress to another, fit to break your neck. But it does seem as if after always being busy you couldn't be real happy to settle down to idleness."

Persis smiled.

"I guess I wasn't cut out for a butterfly, Mis' West, even if I'd got started in time. I'm not afraid but what I can find plenty to do. As far as the sewing goes, I feel like a man I read of who laid a wager he'd eat a quail a day for thirty days. Well, he got along fine. Didn't seem to mind it a bit. When it came the twenty-fifth day and everybody was congratulating him on making his money so easy, he up and quit. 'No use, boys,' he said, when they began to tell him what a fool he was. 'I've just naturally got to the stopping-point.' And it's the same with me. I've done my sewing and haven't fretted over it, though when I think of the millions and millions of stitches I've taken in twenty years, I wonder I haven't turned into a sewing-machine,

But I've got to the stopping-point now. It's more'n likely I'll buy my own clothes ready-made, after this."

In a month's time the old house was transformed beyond recognition, the fresh paint of the exterior holding its own bravely against the pretensions of the fresh paper and new carpets within. Thomas Hardin had sent to Boston for those carpets, the patterns in stock not satisfying Persis' exacting ideas. The transaction had been conducted with businesslike despatch on both sides, though on one occasion Thomas relaxed his dignity sufficiently to say, "Guess you're going to look pretty fine up there."

Persis dryly admitted the prospective improvement. "Some folks can't bear to part with what's old, but I own I've got a liking for new things. When I can afford a change, I'm glad to have it."

"Friends the same as carpets," Thomas thought with a little bitterness for which he at once reproached himself. For, after all, Persis' friendship had been stanch and steadfast till his own confession had disclosed his unworthiness. He atoned for his momentary lapse by making her a substantial discount on the linoleum she wanted for the kitchen.

The seal of silence Joel had placed upon his lips was broken when the question of engaging a servant girl came to the fore. "Ain't you going to leave yourself nothing to do?" he demanded wildly. Then with a cunning for which few would have given him credit. "You'll get as fat as Etta West sitting around all day and being waited on."

Persis listened unmoved, her rather enigmatic smile suggesting that she clearly foresaw a way out of that difficulty.

"I'm not afraid but what I can find enough to keep me busy. Besides, I need a servant girl to look after things when I'm away."

"Away? Are you going away?"

"I'm going whenever I happen to feel like it. And the first time'll be next week, Monday."

"Persis, where are you going?"

"To the city for a week or so."

Joel deliberated. He rose and paced the room, halting at length in a dramatic posture, face to face with his sister.

"Persis, I've got no love for the city as you well know. As the poet says, 'God the first garden made and the first city, Cain.' But I'm ready to sacrifice myself for what's best for you. I'll go along."

Persis regarded him without any indication of fervent gratitude for the sacrifice so nobly announced.

"It's good of you, Joel, but it won't be necessary."

He waved her protest away with a dominating gesture.

"It *is* necessary. It won't do to turn a woman like you loose in a city like Boston. As long as you didn't have any money, it wasn't so much matter. But now there'll be folks to sell you gold bricks, and when you unwrap 'em, they won't be nothing but plain ordinary bricks after all."

"They can't sell me bricks if I won't buy 'em, Joel."

"You don't know what they can do. You never went up against a professional sharper. Women ain't any match for that kind. They'll probably give me a bed at the hotel that hasn't been used since sometime last winter, but never mind. I'm going along to protect you."

"Joel!" Persis' tone for all its gentleness showed plenty of decision. "Thank you, but this time I don't want you."

"What's that?"

"Some other time when you feel like running up

to the city for a few days, we'll go together. But just now I've got some business to attend to."

"You mean I'd be in the way?"

"Yes."

"Persis." Joel spoke in heart-broken accents. "I guess the Good Book ain't far wrong in calling money the root of all evil. Up till you come into this prop'ty, you was all a man could ask for in a sister." Like many another, Joel found his blessings brightest in retrospect. "But now you're as set as a post and as stubborn as a mule. It's pretty dangerous, Persis, when a woman gets the idea she knows all that's worth knowing. As the poet says, 'A little learning is a dangerous thing.' . I feel in my bones that there's trouble coming out of this wild-goose chase of yours."

It was not characteristic of Joel to keep his grievances secret. Wherever he went for the next few days, he fairly oozed reproach and resentment. And on the Monday when Persis took the ten o'clock train for Boston it was generally understood that she had declined the pleasure of her brother's company and was bent on an errand whose nature she alone knew.

"She'll put up at a hotel, I suppose," said Mrs.

Hornblower. "She'll have to, for there's nobody in Boston she knows well enough to visit. A single woman staying alone at a hotel sounds dreadful improper to me. Robert would never allow me to do such a thing, never for a minute. And nobody even knows what she's gone for."

But Annabel Sinclair thought she knew. "I shouldn't wonder," she told Diantha, "if when Persis Dale gets back we'd see startling changes."

Her confidential tone was balm to Diantha's spirit. For since the daughter's sudden leap into maturity, the relations between the two had been strained, the instinct of sex rivalry overmastering such shadowy maternal impulses as had outlived Diantha's babyhood. The girl responded eagerly to the advance.

"Yes, I shouldn't wonder if she'd have lots of new clothes."

"She'll need more than clothes to make her presentable, and she knows it, too." Annabel's voice was rasping. "They have beauty-shops in the cities, you know, where they fix over old women who want to look young, skin off the wrinkles and all sorts of things." She flashed a glance at the mirror—there was always a mirror convenient in the Sinclair establishment—and smiled with malicious enjoyment. Annabel did not need skinning.

Diantha edged away with sudden distaste. "I don't think Miss Persis would do anything like that, mama."

"Why not?" Her mother spoke fiercely. "It's the sensible thing to do when you need it. After her good looks are gone, there's nothing left for a woman." The bitterness of a participant in a losing fight flung a black shadow across her fairness. For defy Time as she would, the day must come when he would triumph. She looked again at herself in the mirror as if already he had stolen the bloom from her cheek and the gold from her hair and shuddered at the thought of what must be.

Persis had said to her brother that she might be away a week. On the sixth day came a brief note to the effect that her business was not quite finished and that she would let him know when to expect her. Another week went by, and one afternoon Joel received his first telegram.

He stood staring at the sinister brown envelope with its black lettering, and a chilly fear clutched his heart. One catastrophe after another suggested itself, each to be discarded in favor of another more appalling. Persis had lost her money. She had met with an accident. She was dead. His bony hand shook till the envelope rattled, and the small

boy who had brought the message eyed him with curiosity.

"Any answer?"

The question was reassuring. It suggested that Persis was still to be reached by mundane means of communication. Joel regarded the lad appealingly.

"Say, son, do you know what's in this?"

"Naw!" The boy's tone showed impatience tinged with contempt. "Why don't you look and see for yourself?"

The suggestion seemed reasonable, and Joel followed it. The typewritten enclosure blurred before his eyes, and so strong is the force of apprehension that he seemed to see words of ominous import staring up at him through the confusion. Then the mist cleared and his forebodings with it.

"Home on four-twenty train not necessary to meet me tell Mary to have plenty for supper.

"Persis Dale."

Joel felt the sense of grievance which is the almost inevitable sequel to groundless fears. "There's no answer," he told the boy gruffly. The urchin sidled away and Joel stood rigid, regarding the slip in his hand. His first move was to count the words. Seventeen! Joel groaned. What extrav-

agance. If she had said "unnecessary" instead of "not necessary" there would have been a saving of one to begin with. And the closing injunction might have been omitted altogether. "Tell Mary to have plenty for supper." What an extraordinary request to telegraph from the city of Boston. Could it be that in the metropolis of New England she had lacked for food to satisfy the pangs of appetite?

So absorbed did he become in attempting to solve the riddle that he almost forgot to impart the contents of the telegram to Mary. The fresh-colored farmer's daughter who had found life extremely montonous without the vivacious presence of her mistress, heard the news with elation and showed no surprise over the concluding request.

"I've heard how they feed folks in them city places. Ma's cousin was a waiter in a Boston boarding-house onct, and she says she was fairly ashamed to set before folks the little dabs that was served out, for all the world like samples. I guess after two whole weeks of that kind of food, Miss Dale's good and hungry."

Joel noticed with irritation that Persis had carried her independence to the point of suggesting that it was not necessary for him to meet her, though she was well aware that his presence at the station when

the four-twenty train came in, had taken on almost the sacredness of a religious rite. "Looks as if she wasn't in any dreadful hurry to see me," Joel mused. It occurred to him that it would be a fitting return for Persis' perverseness for him to retire to his room and refuse to leave except at her humble and reiterated entreaty. It is unfortunate that so often the course of conduct consistent with one's dignity involves a painful sacrifice. As train-time drew near, Joel realized that he would not be equal to the ordeal of absenting himself, even for so worthy a cause as to teach Persis a much-needed lesson.

There was the usual number of loungers on the station platform, and Joel was soon surrounded by an interested circle. As the brother of a woman of property, he had acquired a certain vicarious importance in the last few weeks. Information as to what Persis was doing, or about to do, was sought eagerly in all directions, and Joel's vanity was flattered at finding himself the center of attention, even though in his heart he was well aware of the reason.

"Sister having a good time up to Boston?" inquired a florid man, who despite the chilliness of the late fall day was in his shirt-sleeves.

The uncertainty in Joel's mind as to whether Persis had spent her time attending the theater or in the surgical ward of a hospital, caused him to evade a direct answer.

"Oh, so-so. I'm expecting her home on this train."

The countenances of the group brightened. Some of them had come a long distance to await the four-twenty train. Pressing work was on the consciences of several. It was agreeable to know that their sacrifices were not thrown away. They would see Persis Dale step off the train and would be able to tell their wives at supper whether, as far as their obtuse masculine powers of observation had been able to determine, she was arrayed in the spoils of city shops.

The train screamed at the crossing half a mile below and made its appearance with the usual accompaniments of smoke and rattle. Passengers looked with weary interest at the crowd on the platform, and the crowd on the platform watched eagerly for alighting passengers. A farmer living in the vicinity left the smoking-car to be given scant welcome, for the lookers-on were anticipating something more impressive. A fat old woman with a basket and a couple of shawl-straps was also coldly

received. Then some one caught Joel's arm with an exclamation, muffled but profane.

There was a parlor-car at the rear of the train, a concession to the passengers for Montreal. From this a rather striking procession was descending. It was led by a dark handsome boy about twelve years of age, while a fair girl, a little younger, followed behind. Another boy and then another girl, smaller and chubbier than their predecessors, were next to receive the assistance of the obsequious porter. And lastly he gave his attention to a woman who carried a baby in her arms. The woman wore a hat and coat new to Clematis, but there was something not unfamiliar in her erect carriage, and the capable fashion in which she directed the movements of her little flock.

"Straight ahead, children. Algie, you walk right toward that hack with the two gray horses, and the rest of you follow Algie. Well, here's Uncle Joel come to meet us."

Some one pushed Joel forward. With his jaw dropping and his eyes protruding, he looked like a criminal urged on toward the scaffold rather than a man of affectionate disposition welcoming home a family circle unexpectedly enlarged. The hoarse gurgle which escaped his lips might have passed

for a greeting, or it might have presaged an epileptic seizure.

"Well, Joel." Persis nodded affably, at the same time patting the baby which, frightened by the proximity of so many strange faces, was beginning to whimper. "As long as you're here, you might as well see about our trunks. Give Uncle Joel the checks, Algie. No, not that pocket. You put 'em in the right-hand one."

The crowd surged nearer and a piping voice made itself heard above the confusion. "Miss Dale, looks as if you was going to have lively times with all that company."

Persis cast a benignant gaze in the speaker's direction. She had never held curiosity in low esteem as do the more rigid moralists, acknowledging indeed, her full share of that characteristic. And moreover she was quite willing that her old friends and neighbors, the most of whom had congratulated her so heartily on her recent good fortune, should know of her latest acquisition.

"I guess we'll have a lively time all right, Mr. Jones, but these children ain't what you call company. I adopted the whole lot up to Boston, and every one of the five's a Dale, as hard and fast as the law can make 'em."

CHAPTER XV

A WOMAN AT LAST

EVEN if Joel's command of English had enabled him to express himself freely regarding his sister's latest acquisition, the opportunity was not immediately forthcoming. The demonstrations of five excited children, introduced into an environment entirely unfamiliar, proved absorbing to all the household. With the exception of the baby who clung shyly to Persis, refusing to leave her side, the new reinforcements to the Dale family at once organized exploring expeditions about the premises. Little feet clattered on the stairs and shrilly sweet voices announced discoveries from garret to cellar. Joel, who had improved the first opportunity to withdraw to his own room, pushed the heaviest chair against the door in lieu of a key and sat in the chair. And though his knob rattled a number of times, the investigations of the juvenile explorers ceased at his threshold.

When the summons of the supper-bell sounded

through the house, Joel was uncertain whether to indicate his displeasure by remaining in his room or to present himself as usual, allowing Persis to see with her own eyes the condition to which her selfishness had reduced him. He decided on the latter course, not so much as a concession to his appetite as because he feared that in Persis' present absorption, his absence would hardly be noticed. Wearing the expression becoming one stricken by the hand of a friend, he left his room and faced the invaders below.

The dining-room table had been extended to a length which carried his thoughts back to his childhood. The baby, a frail-looking child, between two and three, had not yet attained the dignity of a place at the table but sat in a high-chair at Persis' left and drummed with her spoon upon the adjustable shelf which served the double purpose of keeping her in place and supporting her bowl of bread and milk. The renaissance of the high-chair was responsible for a curious surge of emotion through Joel's consciousness. Persis herself had once occupied that chair and for a moment his sister's matronly figure at the head of the table was singularly suggestive of his mother. He dropped into his place with a hollow groan.

"Has he got a stomach ache?" inquired five-year-old Celia from the other end of the table. The echoing whisper was distinctly audible. Betty, ten years old, pink, prim and pretty, blushed reproachfully at her new foster sister, while Mary, who was just bringing in the milk toast, was agitated by a tremor which imperiled the family supper.

"Sh!" Persis temporarily subdued the outbreaking of her new responsibilities by a lift of the eyebrows, and began to serve the milk toast with lavish hand. Joel waved away the plate Mary brought him.

"I can't eat that truck. Truth is I haven't got a mite of appetite, but just to keep up my strength I'll take a soft-boiled egg. I've got to have something sustaining."

"Two eggs, Mary," said Persis to her hand-maid. "And give 'em just two minutes and a half." The order failed to attract the attention of Celia, absorbed at the moment in allaying the pangs of appetite. It was not till the eggs were brought in and placed by Joel's plate that the irrepressible infant was roused to the realization of the enormity of the situation. She dropped her fork with a clatter.

"Oh, Aunt Persis, see what they've gone and done."

"What is it, child?"

"You said that little chickies came out of eggs." There was no further pretense of whispering on Celia's part. Her voice rose in a tragic wail. "And now he's going to eat up those eggs, and I wanted to save 'em to make chickies of. Oh, dear, dear!"

"'Tain't the right time of year for chickens, dearie," Persis explained soothingly. "We'll have plenty next spring." But Joel glanced at the objects which had called out Celia's protest with an air of extreme distaste.

"It's enough to take away a hearty man's appetite," he complained. "I guess if my victuals are going to be grudged me, I'd better eat up-stairs."

"Don't gobble, Malcolm," said Persis, ignoring her brother's burst of ill temper and addressing the little lad on her right. "And tuck your napkin under your chin so you won't get anything on your blouse."

At this point the tactful Betty created a diversion by inquiring, "When shall we start going to school, Aunt Persis? Monday?"

"Looks to me as if to-morrow'd be the best day.

It's my idea that if a thing's worth starting at all, you can't start too soon. Some folks save up their good resolutions for the first of the year, but it's a better way to begin right off as soon as you think of it. And then when the New Year comes, you're just that much ahead."

"I'm going to study awful hard," declared Algie, with an air of putting this good counsel to immediate application.

"Well, I'm not," announced Malcolm with equal decision. And then as Betty emitted a protesting and shocked murmur, he explained: "Of course I'll study some, but I've got to save the most of my strength for playing football when I'm big."

Joel pushed back his chair and took his egg cup from the table.

"I guess I'll go to my room, Persis," he said in a hollow voice. "Maybe up-stairs where it's quiet, I'll be able to eat a little. And to-morrow you'd better have Mary make me some beef tea. I've got to have something to keep up my strength." Slowly and solemnly he mounted the stairs, convinced by the increased animation of the voices in the room below that his departure had not cast an irreparable gloom over the cheerful spirits of the diners.

This time he did not feel it necessary to barricade the door. Indeed he left it a trifle ajar, and so was party to the cheerful confusion of getting the children to bed. The baby—Amaryllis was her impossible name, though she looked too fragile to sustain its weight—was to share Persis' quarters. The two older girls occupied the chamber adjoining. The two boys had been assigned to a snug little room on the other side of the hall.

"Close by me so I can hear every mite of their rowdy-dow," Joel thought with bitterness. But in spite of himself he listened. The children were calling to one another across the hall. Apparently their previous acquaintance had been slight, and in addition to the excitement of finding themselves in a new environment, they were experiencing the more intoxicating novelty of becoming acquainted all at once with a fair-sized contingent of brothers and sisters.

" 'Most ready for bed, children?" Persis' voice sounded rich and deep, contrasting with the piping chatter. "Time you was asleep, for to-morrow's a school day. And you've got to say your prayers yet."

"I said mine on the train coming down," explained

Malcolm with his quaint drawl. "Thought I might as well save the time as long as there wasn't anything else to do."

"I've got a new prayer to say," announced Celia, flashing into the hall, a diminutive apparition, white-clad, with twinkling pink feet. "It's this way:

" 'Baa, baa, black sheep, have you any wool?
Yes sir, yes sir, three bags full.' "

"I think I can teach you a nicer prayer than that," Persis said serenely, while the older children laughed with the vast superiority of their wider knowledge. Joel uttered an exclamation of horror.

"Children are natural blasphemers. Persis ought to take that little limb in hand. If she don't know the difference between Mother Goose and praying, she ought to be taught quick. Old Doctor Watts was in the right of it.

" 'Lord, we are vile, conceived in sin,
And born unholy and unclean.' "

The murmur of conversation in the adjoining rooms died away. Once or twice after quiet descended, a little voice spoke out like the chirp of a

drowsy bird, brooded over by mother wings. Persis went softly down the stairs. Joel waited long enough to make his advent impressive and followed her.

She sat as he had seldom seen her, thrown back in the roomy recesses of the the big easy chair, her hands lying loosely in her lap. Her attitude suggested the relaxation following fatigue. Her eyes were half closed, her lips smiling. An indefinable rapture radiated from her. All her life Persis Dale had been a resolutely cheerful person. But that consistent, conscientious optimism was as unlike her present lightness of heart as the heat of a coal fire, carefully fed and tended, differs from the gracious warmth of June.

Singularly enough the sight of her satisfaction stirred her brother to instant indignation. Up to this moment a sense of grievance had been uppermost. Now he found himself shaken by hot anger. The instinct of the male to dominate, outlasting the strength which sustains and protects, spurred him on to have his way with her, to master this madness which threatened the peace of his life.

"Persis," he began in a loud angry voice, "what's the meaning of this piece of tom-foolishness?"

She opened her eyes and looked at him. After

her two weeks' absence, their longest separation in twenty years, she saw him almost as a stranger would have done, a slight, undersized man with a bulging forehead which told of nature's generous endowments, and the weak chin, explaining his failure to measure up to the promise of his youth. His disheveled hair and burning eyes gave an unprepossessing touch to the picture. But the maternal feeling, always uppermost where her brother was concerned, had been intensified by the children's advent. Persis felt for the moment the indulgent disapproval of a mother toward an unreasonable child.

"Why, Joel!" Her voice, with its new depth and richness, caressed the name it uttered. "What's foolish about it?"

The gentleness of her answer misled him. He felt a sudden thrilling conviction of his ability to bring her to terms.

"What's foolish about it? What ain't foolish, you'd better say. Looks to me as if you'd taken leave of your senses. Filling up the house with pauper brats."

The blood went out of her face. The smile lingered, but it had become merely a muscular contraction, like the smile on dead lips. The soul had left it.

"Yes," she said steadily. "It's true they're poor. But it's not for you to fling that in their faces. A man who's lived on his sister's earnings for twenty years."

He was dumb for a moment, wincing under the taunt but lacking words to answer. He was not without reasonable qualities, and reason told him he had taken the wrong track. The change in his voice when he spoke again would have seemed ludicrous had she been in a mood to be amused.

"See here, Persis, you've got a chance now to take things easy. You've worked hard," he admitted patronizingly, "and you've earned a right to enjoy the rest of your life. Now, see how silly 'twould be to saddle yourself with looking after a pack of children. It's no joke, I can tell you; bringing up five young ones, nursing 'em through measles and whooping-cough and the Lord knows what, and never being sure whether they'll turn out good or bad. Maybe you think I'm prejudiced, but I'll bet you anything you like that at this minute half Clematis is wondering whether you're clean crazy or what."

Under his conciliatory address her first anger had cooled. A little half-contemptuous smile curled her lips.

"It's a funny thing, Joel, you've known me for quite a spell—thirty-seven years, the sixth of October—and you haven't found out yet that I'm not looking for an easy time. My idea of Heaven ain't a place where you can sit down and fold your hands."

"I s'pose you'd rather stick at home and fuss over other folks' children than travel. You used to be crazy about foreign places, Roosia and Italy and Egypt." Joel's eyes kindled with an unholy light as he repeated the magic names. A bystander might have been reminded of another tempter showing the kingdoms of the earth as a lure.

"Time enough to travel," Persis said laconically, "when my family is raised."

"Giving up all the peace of your home, all the quiet—"

"Stillness isn't peace, Joel. There's quiet enough in the grave, if that's what you're after. I don't want the hush of the tomb around here. I want little feet tripping up and down and little voices calling. Seems to me as if this old house had come alive since I brought these children into it. And I've come alive myself. It's what I always wanted, a family of children. I gave it up like I've given

up so many things, but I've got it at last, thank God."

"Persis," Joel remonstrated in shocked accents, "it's not becoming for a single woman to say things like that. Wanting children, indeed. If you weren't my sister I shouldn't know what to make of such talk."

She leaned toward him, her hands on her knees. Her gray eyes, warmed almost to blue by joy and tenderness, were steely as she faced him.

"Joel, you don't take it into account that the Almighty didn't make old maids. He made us just women, and the hunger for children is nothing more to be ashamed of than the longing for food and drink. I'm not accusing Him either, when I say that life isn't fair to a lot of us. It hangs other people's burdens on our backs, and they weigh us down till we haven't the strength to take what is rightfully ours. These children had ought to be mine. My blood ought to be in their veins. It's too late for that, but it's not too late for everything. What would Aunt Persis Ann's money be worth to me if all it meant was that I could fix up the house and leave off making dresses for other folks and travel around and see the world? It's done

more than that. It's made up to me for being cheated out of my rights. It's made me a woman at last."

Up-stairs sounded a fretful wail, a sharp little note, piercing the quiet evening with its suggestion of discomfort or alarm. In an instant Persis was on her feet. Again her face was luminous. Suffused with a transforming tenderness, it lost its stern lines and became radiantly youthful. Blue misty shadows veiled the steely light of her eyes.

"The baby's crying," she said, and left him swiftly. And Joel, with a bewildered sense of enlightenment carried to the point of dazzling effulgence, clapped both hands over his throbbing head.

"Well," he gasped "I'll be jiggered! Looks like you can live in the same house with a woman from the time she's born till she's gray-headed and not know her any better than if you'd met her once at a Sunday-school picnic. To think of Persis with all those feelings bottled up inside her for the last twenty years. As the immortal Shakespeare says,

" 'Who is't can read a woman?' "

CHAPTER XVI

WHERE ANGELS FEAR TO TREAD

THE morning following the heterogeneous accession to the Dale family, Joel did not leave his bed. Whether his disability was in part or altogether due to a desire to open his sister's eyes to the result of her lack of consideration, Joel himself could not have told, the correct interpretation of one's own motives being the most complex of the sciences. It really seemed to him that he felt very ill and he found a somber satisfaction in reflecting that in the event of his death, Persis would realize her appalling selfishness. "'Twon't come much short of murder," he thought with gloomy relish.

Joel's periods of invalidism had been too frequent and prolonged for this sporadic attack to upset the peaceful order of the household. Persis attended to his needs with her usual matter-of-fact kindness, though he suspected that her thoughts were with the new claimants on her interest and found therein

fresh fuel for his grievance. Later when he called his sister in the feeble voice of the moribund and learned from Mary that she had gone out to enter the older children in school, he felt himself a much injured man. But this melancholy satisfaction was brief, for Persis was back in half an hour, looking in at his door to ask cheerfully if there was anything he wanted. "Nothing I'm likely to get," replied Joel and turned his face to the wall.

Then, too, the house was quiet. Occasionally the baby's fretful voice reached his ears or Celia's bubbling, irrepressible laughter; but the tumult on which he had counted confidently as a factor in his discomfort was lacking. At noon, indeed, the older children came in with a shout, brimful of communications too important to wait, so that the three all talked at once, each voice upraised in a laudable endeavor to drown out the other two. But just as Joel was telling himself that it was intolerable, enough to drive a man out of his seven senses, the announcement of dinner produced an agreeable lull in the uproar. And when the baby was taken upstairs for its nap and Celia cautioned to discretion, the quiet became even more profound. Joel found it necessary to prod his sense of grievance to keep it in action.

He had been awake much of the preceding night, brooding upon his wrongs, and weariness at length asserted itself and he fell asleep. He woke with a thrilled consciousness of a light touch on his forehead and for a moment he thought himself a child again, with his mother bending over him. Demonstrativeness had never been a Dale characteristic. Indeed the traditions of the community discouraged manifestations of affection as an indication of weakness, but few mothers as they stand beside their sleeping children can resist the sweet temptation to kiss the little unconscious faces. And Joel Dale, prematurely aged, selfish and embittered, woke nearer his childish self, and nearer Heaven, than he had been in many a year.

For a moment he lay bewildered, then opened an eye. An elfin voice beside him commented on the fact. "Half of you's awake and half asleep. Ain't that funny?"

Joel's two eyes came into action long enough to perceive Celia, sitting in a chair drawn close to the bed. Her sturdy legs were crossed, her hands folded. She looked dangerously demure.

"I gave you a kiss when you was asleep, a pink one. Do you like pink kisses?"

"Pink?" he repeated, too startled by the choice

of adjectives to realize how long it had been since any one had kissed him.

"Aunt Persis let me have some jelly," Celia explained. "I like to lick my lips off, but I didn't so I could give you a nice pink kiss."

He put one hand hastily to his forehead, thereby verifying his worst suspicions. It was sticky. Joel groaned.

"Want me to 'poor' you?" the fairy voice inquired with an accent indicating a sense of responsibility. A small hand moved over his unshaven cheek. "Poor Uncle Joel! Poor Uncle Joel," cooed Celia. She interrupted her efforts to ask with interest, "Do you like your skin all prickles? Mine ain't that way," and proved her statement by laying a cheek like a rose-leaf against his. Joel shrank away gasping.

"Want me to tell you a story?" Celia did not wait for Joel's assent. The ministering hand nestled against his cheek; she drew a long breath and began.

"Once when I was a little girl, there was a giant lived up by my house. And he was an awful wicked giant, and he used to bite people's heads off. And he wanted to fight everybody, and everybody was scared 'cept just me." She paused, overcome by the contemplation of her own heroism. "Wasn't

that funny? Everybody was 'fraid 'cept a teenty, weenty girl."

Joel lay staring at his entertainer, his expression suggestive of such excitement, not to say horror, that the narrator apparently found it inspiring.

"And the old giant kept a-talking and a-talking and a-biting and a-biting. And one day I took my bow'n arrow— No." She corrected herself sternly, with the air of one who refuses to deviate ever so slightly from the strict facts. "I took my sling and some stones I found in the brook—"

Joel suddenly realized his responsibility as a mentor of youth. "Look here! Look here! I can't have such talk. You're making that up out of your own head. You never lived near a giant, and I don't believe you ever had a sling."

"Oh, yes, I had a sling, Uncle Joel, and once I shooted a bear with it—and a Indian."

"I guess you haven't been very well brought up," rebuked Joel, who like most people of his type was quite unable to distinguish between the gambols of the creative imagination and deliberate falsifying. "Don't you know where little girls go when they tell lies?"

"I knew a little girl once who telled lies," admitted Celia, her shocked accents indicating her full

appreciation of the reprehensible character of the practise. "And she went to the circus. Her uncle took her."

From under the bed clothing came a peculiar rasping sound like the grating of a rusty key in a lock long unused. It was no wonder that Celia jumped, though she was considerably less startled than Joel himself. He had laughed, and more appalling still, had laughed at unmistakable evidences of natural depravity which by good rights should have awakened in him emotions of abhorrence.

"It would be pretty serious for me to backslide now, considering the state of my health," reflected Joel. He attempted to counteract the effects of that indiscreet laugh by a blood-curdling groan, and this demonstration caused Celia to repeat her calming ministrations, smoothing his rough cheek with velvety hands, and inadvertently poking one plump forefinger into his eye. Joel blinked. He could easily have ordered her from the room, but he did not exercise this prerogative. He was vaguely conscious of an unwarranted satisfaction in the nearness of this pixy. Her preference for his society flattered his vanity. He observed her guardedly from the corner of his eye. Undoubtedly she was a very naughty little girl who told wrong stories and was

painfully lacking in reverence. But at the same time— Joel chuckled again, his vocal chords responding uncertainly to the unfamiliar prompting— at the same time she was *cute*.

At the supper table the evening before for all his gloomy abstraction, Joel had noticed Betty's engaging prettiness and had thought *apropos* of Celia, "Persis never picked that young one out for her looks." Now through half closed eyes he studied the small piquant face and found his opinion altered. Celia was not pretty. Her straight black hair, just long enough to be continually in her eyes, was pushed back for the moment so as to stand almost erect like a crest. Her small nose had an engaging skyward tilt. She was dark and inclined to sallowness. But the twinkling black eyes under the level brows would have redeemed a far plainer face. Had Joel been of a poetic temperament he would have compared Betty to a pink rose-bud, and Celia to a velvety pansy, saucy and bewitching.

Mary, coming up the stairs with a bowl of broth, stood in the doorway petrified. Under her spatter of freckles, her comely face was pale.

"Miss Dale thought—" She seemed unable to proceed and stood swallowing. Celia straightened herself with a jerk.

"Oh, goody! We'll play tea-party, Uncle Joel. No, we'll play mother. You're my little sick boy, Uncle Joel, and I'll feed you. Give that to me, Mary."

Like a person hypnotized Mary advanced and delivered the steaming broth into Celia's extended hands. Setting the bowl firmly on one knee, Celia ladled out a generous spoonful.

"Open your mouth, darling, and swallow this nice broth. It'll make mama's little boy a big strong man."

The soup-spoon journeying in Joel's direction tilted dangerously. Half the contents splashed upon his cheek and ran in a greasy dribble down his neck. The remainder distributed itself impartially in the vicinity of his mouth, a few tantalizing drops finding their way between his parted lips.

"Land alive!" Mary made a horrified forward rush. "You're a-drowning Mr. Dale. And look at you, wasting that nice soup, too."

Joel frowned and Mary drew back abashed, quailing before his disapproving glance.

"I guess if I was being drowned I'd have the sense to mention it. And nobody's going to the poor-house because a little soup gets spilled. Some of the professions are pretty crowded, Mary, but

there's one where there's room at the top and at the bottom, too, and that's the one of minding your own business."

Poor Mary blushed till her proximity to things inflammable would have awakened justifiable fears of a conflagration. Joel gave his attention to his self-appointed nurse. "Steady now! Better take a little less to start with. That's right. Now steer her straight."

The second spoonful reached its destination without serious accident. Celia watched her patient as he swallowed and forgot the rôle she had assigned herself.

"Is it good, Uncle Joel?"

"Uhuh! Pretty fair." Joel felt for his handkerchief and wiped the moist corner of his mouth.

"I'm going to taste it." Celia tilted the spoon to her own lips and sipped with appreciation. "Uncle Joel," she said thoughtfully, "if you're afraid this'll spoil your appetite for supper, I'll eat it."

Again Joel chuckled. This made the third time in swift succession, and practise was giving him surprising facility. But unwarned by past experience, Mary put in her word. "Poor Mr. Dale hasn't eaten scarcely a mouthful to-day, and here you've had bread and jelly since dinner."

Joel's unaccustomed smile was at once obscured. "Mary, a considerable spell back a wise man said, 'Every fool will be meddling.' If you aren't familiar with the author, Mary, it would pay you to read him." Again he gave his attention to Celia. "We'll share this, turn and turn about," he compromised. "First you have a spoonful and then me."

Mary withdrew unheeded. Though tremendously in awe of the impecunious and futile Joel, Mary felt no sense of diffidence where the efficient Persis was concerned, and at once went to find her. But Persis, who sat in one of her new bay-windows, the baby on her knee, was entertaining Mrs. West, while her benignantly maternal eyes watched three children playing outside.

"I declare you could have knocked me down with a feather, Persis, when I heard it," Mrs. West declared, her portliness rendering the figure of speech extremely impressive. "I wouldn't have thought queer of one or even two, but a whole family."

"A family's what I've always wanted," Persis returned with the cheerfulness of a woman whose life-long dream has come true. "'And if I could have found enough of the sort I was after, I'm not sure I'd have stopped short of a round dozen."

"It's a responsibility," sighed Mrs. West. "They're kind of like playthings to you now. You'll feel it later."

Persis looked at her with kind eyes. "I haven't added any new responsibility in taking these children, Mis' West. It was there just as soon as the money and leisure came to me, and I've made a start toward meeting it, that's all. We don't make our responsibilities; we just wake up to 'em."

"I must say you take to it like a duck to water," acknowledged Mrs. West in conciliatory accents. "Some women are just as unhandy with a baby as a man. Sophia Warren's one. Once or twice I've seen her holding that Newell baby that lives next door, and she looked as stiff and scared as if she was setting for her photograph."

She leaned forward to watch the frolicsome children from the window. "They're real nice-looking, Persis, I will say that. One, two, three and the baby's four. Somebody said five."

With a start Persis recalled the suspicious peace which for some time past had pervaded the establishment. "There's another," she said, "too little for school. Mary! Mary, do you know where Celia is?"

Mary approached. Her consciousness of being a

bearer of important tidings communicated itself in some indefinable fashion to the other women. They looked up, alert on the instant.

"Celia's setting up in Mr. Joel's room." Mary gave her great news deliberately as if to enjoy the full flavor.

Persis started to her feet. Mrs. West raised her hands with an eloquent gesture.

"Has he got one of his bad spells?" she demanded. "And that child in his room. Well, fools rush—"

"She's playing he's her little boy," explained Mary, making the most of the sensation of being an actor in a real drama. "She fed him his soup and slopped him, but he took me up sharp when I tried to stop her. He acts as if she's got him clean bewitched."

"Well!" exclaimed Mrs. West, as Persis looked at her dumbly. "I never expected to live to see that Scripture fulfilled. The wolf and lamb lying down together and a weaned child in a cockatrice's den."

"Are you sure he wasn't angry?" asked Persis, still a little pale and doubtful.

Mary bridled.

"Go and see for yourself, Miss Dale, if you don't believe me. When I tried to stop her eating a good half of that broth, and chicken as high as 'tis, he the same as called me a fool for meddling. But

you'd better go up-stairs. You won't be satisfied till you've heard for yourself."

In that Mary spoke truly. Her story was too incredible to be accepted without investigation. Persis' incredulity did not desert her till half-way up the stairs she was met by a child's voice, fond and confident.

"Uncle Joel, ain't God cruel to make some dogs without tails?"

And then as her brother's unfamiliar laugh reached her ears, Persis turned and went softly down the stairs.

CHAPTER XVII

ENID

IF PERSIS DALE'S extraordinary action in adopting a family *en masse* had stirred Clematis from center to circumference, that agitation was trivial in comparison with the flutter produced by Joel's capitulation. Mrs. West, backed up by Mary, told the news to auditors frankly incredulous who yet were sufficiently impressed by her sincerity to resolve on looking into the thing for themselves. Consequently the Dale homestead became a magnet for the curious, and many a skeptic came and went away convinced that the day of miracles had returned.

As a matter of fact Joel's surrender was in accord with the most elemental of psychological laws. With the characteristic caprice of her sex in matters of the heart, Celia had taken a violent fancy to this pale-blooded hypochondriac, and made no secret of the fact that she regarded him as her especial property. Nothing is so flattering to the vanity as the

preference of a child, that naïve, spontaneous affection to which it is impossible to impute mercenary motives. And Joel had responded by becoming Celia's abject slave. He ignored the other children for the most part, seldom betraying, unless perhaps by an impatient gesture or a frown, that he was aware of their existence. But his eyes were always on Celia, and when she spoke, he listened.

As was to be expected, that morsel of femininity improved every opportunity to parade her conquest. She took Joel to walk, holding tightly to his hand and entertaining him with an outpouring of those quaint fancies which have been the heritage of childhood from the beginning and yet always seem to the older generation so marvelously new. She inveigled him into playing whatever rôle she assigned in fantastic dramas of her own creation. He was Celia's father or her little boy as the whim took her, the wolf which devoured Red Riding Hood's grandmother, or the hapless old lady herself, attacked ruthlessly by Celia as wolf. Crawling on all fours he played elephant, or with the handle of a basket between his teeth, he submitted to be patted on the head and addressed as Towser. Persis looked on with a wonder that never lost its poignancy. That the self-centered Joel should succumb to the inno-

cent spell of childhood had never entered her calculations, and she reproached herself that she had so little understood him.

The comments of Persis' acquaintances were characteristic. Mrs. West, on the occasion of a second call, hinted her anxiety regarding the future of the impromptu family. "When you pick children up that way, you can't tell how they're going to turn out."

"And when you bring 'em into the world," remarked Persis dryly, "and rear 'em yourself and never let 'em out of your sight when you can help it, you don't know how they're going to turn out either." There was in her manner an ingenious suggestion of having in mind the recent heartbroken confidences of Thad's mother, and Etta West blushed hotly and changed the subject.

Mrs. Robert Hornblower looked upon the acquisition as practical rebellion against the decrees of Providence. In Persis' presence, she said little, having a sincere respect for her ex-dressmaker's gift of repartee. But to Mr. Hornblower, she expressed herself in no uncertain terms.

"If it's the Lord's will for a woman to raise a family, it stands to reason He'll send her a husband. This snapping your fingers in the face of the Al-

mighty and gathering up children from here and there and anywhere, looks downright impious."

"Seems to me," began Mr. Hornblower in mild expostulation, "that Persis Dale—"

"Yes, I know, Robert," interrupted the submissive wife. "I feel just as you do. It's always been Persis Dale's greatest fault to imagine that she's a law unto herself. But this time she's overstepped the mark."

"Those children are orphans," exclaimed Mr. Hornblower, his complexion becoming apoplectic. "And if—"

In another instant he would have spoken his mind. Only by raising her voice so his next words became inaudible, did his wife avoid that catastrophe.

"I don't wonder you're shocked, Robert," said Mrs. Hornblower, "to think of her bringing into Clematis children of nobody knows who, to grow up with our own boys and girls and as like as not lead 'em astray. All I can say is that Persis Dale may have a lot to answer for some day."

Though Mrs. Hornblower's stand was somewhat extreme she was not without her supporters. Thomas Hardin's sister, Mrs. Gibson, declared with unconcealed rancor that Persis would have done better to think about getting a husband before interest-

ing herself in securing a family. Mrs. Richards, with sanctimonious rolling of her eyes, admitted that she had recognized long before an inherent coarseness in the character of Persis Dale. Others like Annabel Sinclair exclaimed over the folly of burdening one's self with juvenile responsibilities when free to seek distraction wherever one pleased.

Diantha did not agree with her mother. Ever since the memorable occasion when, with the dressmaker's connivance, she had startled Clematis by growing up between noon and supper-time, she had been one of Persis' attendant satellites. But after the advent of the children she fairly haunted the establishment. She dropped in after breakfast to announce that Miss Perkins credited Algie with having the best head for arithmetic of any boy in her room and came again at noon to suggest taking Malcolm and Celia for a walk. But though she distributed her favors with creditable impartiality, she found the baby peculiarly fascinating. And rather to Persis' surprise, the frail and fretful little creature, who looked askance even at the kindly Mary, fell under the spell of the girlish beauty and always had a smile for Diantha.

"Goodness, child, you do look grown up," Persis exclaimed abruptly one afternoon, as she glanced

at the pair snuggled in the depths of the armchair. Diantha had flung her hat aside. Her face was dreamy as she looked down at the little head against her shoulder. All her girlish coquetry, every trace of juvenile mischief, the occasional flashes of petulance which told that she was her mother's daughter had vanished. She looked a brooding madonna.

Ordinarily Diantha would have fluttered at the compliment. In her present preoccupation, it drew from her only a thoughtful smile.

"She's going to sleep," she said, an exquisite softness in her voice. "How nice and heavy their heads feel when they're sleepy, Miss Persis!"

"Well?"

"I'm going to adopt a lot of children some day. I always was crazy to have a crowd around. The way I've prayed for a sister," sighed Diantha, her face temporarily overcast. And then brightening: "When I get old enough to do as I please, I'll make up for it."

Persis, studying the rapt young face, made no immediate reply. Her sense of guilty complicity in Diantha's precocious womanhood distracted her attention from the girl's resentful speech. Apparently her silence proved stimulating to Diantha's impulse toward confidences.

"Do you know the latest notion mother's got in her head?"

"No."

"She wants to send me off to school somewhere. She talks to father and talks to him, till I'm afraid she'll tire him into it. Thad West says any woman can get her way if she never stops talking about it."

Persis regarded her keenly and Diantha's color rose. For no apparent reason her blush became a conflagration.

"I didn't know you and Thad had much chance to talk things over nowadays."

"They won't let him come to the house. They say I'm too young." Diantha laughed mockingly. "And mother was only a little older when she married father, and she was engaged twice before that."

"I suppose you keep on seeing him just the same."

"Course I do."

Persis mused. Diantha was wrong, undoubtedly, and yet more sinned against than sinning. Cautions and expostulations were unavailing with this spirited young creature, smarting under continued injustice and seeing with her uncompromising clearness of vision the selfish jealousy which would keep her out of her birthright indefinitely. "You want to be real careful, Diantha," said Persis, realizing the

futility of her words. "Thad's a nice boy and you're a nice girl, but it don't look well for young folks to be meeting on the sly."

She tried but with little success, to exercise a certain supervision over Diantha that winter. Though the children came down with measles one after another, and Joel had an attack of rheumatism which kept him a prisoner in his bed for seven weeks, it seemed to Persis that Diantha was never really out of her mind. She was surprised on the other hand to find how little Justin Ware was in her thoughts. Instead of returning to Clematis in a few weeks as he had intended, he had been called West unexpectedly. He had not written Persis to apprise her of his change of plans, and she heard of it only through Mrs. Hornblower. And the astonishing part was that she heard it with scarcely a pang. She had discontinued her practise of saying good night to the photograph in the plush frame with Justin Ware's return, but sometimes when the house was still, she took her stand before it and studied the pleasant, immature face intently, as if trying to read from its ingenuous smile a solution of some inward perplexity.

The measles and the winter ran their course together. The children ventured out and the daffodils

ventured up. Joel hobbled about with a cane and took Celia in search of violets. The baby who had come very near dying, decided apparently that since recovery was in order she might as well make a thorough job of it and began to grow fat and sweet-tempered and to acquire dimples. And Persis made the pleasing discovery that in the months during which she had been a woman of property, she had not spent her income and resolved at once on rectifying this needless opulence.

"I've done considerable plodding in my time, I wouldn't mind a little skimming for a change," thought Persis. Next to a family she had long craved an automobile. The surplus of her income was sufficient for the purchase of one of the cheaper grades of cars. Persis decided on a visit to the city, with a view to making this investment.

"I'm a little seedy with being shut in so much this winter, and a trip will do me good whether I buy an automobile or not. Mary's mother will come and stay with her and help out with the children. And if Joel wants to go along, he can." But apparently the protective impulse which had moved Joel to offer his company on the occasion of her previous visit had waned during the winter. He declined the invitation without thanks.

It was proof enough of Persis' temperamental youthfulness that she reached the city with as keen a sense of adventure as if she had been a runaway boy following a circus. She went to the modest hotel she had patronized the previous fall and was surprised and flattered when the clerk called her by name.

"Gives a body a home-coming feeling, that does," remarked Persis, as she wrote the cramped signature which so poorly represented her robust personality. "I don't see how you can remember everybody, with folks coming and going all the time."

"There are some people it's easy to remember," replied the clerk gallantly and at the same time with sincerity. Whatever else time erased from the tablets of his memory, he would never forget Persis, and her acquisition of a family. Then he looked at her interrogatively, for Persis had jumped, blotting the register.

"You'll have to excuse me." Persis reached for the blotter. "I saw a name I know and it sort of took my breath." There were but two signatures on the page besides her own, the names of Mrs. Honoria Walsh and Enid Randolph, both of Warren, New York.

"I'll give you room forty-two," said the clerk, tak-

ing a key from the hook and nodding to a watchful lad in uniform. "Mrs. Walsh and her niece Miss Randolph are on the same floor. If they are friends of yours—"

"No, I wouldn't say that," Persis interrupted. "It's just that I've heard of 'em before." As she left the elevator on the second floor, two women glided past her, one the portly widow with abundant crêpe who is not easily differentiated, the other a stately girl with blonde hair and a scornfully tilted chin. Instinct told Persis that the latter was Enid.

She enjoyed her first day vastly. She drove some two hundred miles in machines of different makes and listened with keen interest to the arguments proving conclusively that each was superior to all others. Night found her tired, a little homesick for the children, but still happy, nevertheless. She finished her dinner—a good dinner as became a woman of means—and went into the little writing-room off the parlor with the intention of jogging Mary's memory regarding the baby's diet. There was but one person in the room, a young woman with fair hair busily engaged in writing.

Persis sat down at the next desk. She was aware of a marked acceleration of the pulse which to her temperament was far from disquieting.

"Excuse me, but isn't this Miss Enid Randolph?"

"Yes." The young woman looked up from her letter. Though her hair was light, her brows were dark and her air distinctly distant.

"I've always wanted to meet you." Persis spoke with unabashed friendliness. "I've been interested in you for quite a spell. My name is Dale, Persis Dale."

Miss Randolph lifted her fine eyebrows, but offered no further comment on this interesting circumstance.

"Perhaps you'll remember," Persis continued briskly, "that we've had a little correspondence. At least you wrote me about a letter of yours to a Mr. Wash—"

"I remember the incident clearly," said Miss Randolph. For all her chilling air, she glanced toward the door to assure herself that they were not overheard. "It is true I wrote you," she continued with a hauteur which would have reduced a less buoyant nature to instant dumbness. "But I hardly see that this constitutes a ground for considering ourselves acquaintances."

So far from being crushed, Persis smiled. And there was something so frankly spontaneous in her look of amusement, that the young woman colored.

"Bless you, I know it wasn't a letter of introduction," Persis assured her with unimpaired good humor. "But I've always wanted to tell you that when you wrote me that time, you did a lot of good without knowing it. Love-letters seem to me like firearms. In the proper hands they're real useful, but if the wrong people get hold of 'em it's bound to make trouble. At least that was the way with the one you wrote Mr. Wash—"

For the second time Miss Randolph looked toward the door, and when next Persis saw her eyes they were appealing rather than disdainful.

"The letter by mistake was sent to a young man who lives in Clematis," Persis continued. "His name is Thompson, and W. Thompson, at that. He thought it such a joke that he put it in his pocket for his wife to find. Didn't know 'twas loaded, you see. And when she did find it and he explained, she didn't believe him. I don't know as anybody believed him but me, but it seemed such a silly explanation for a sensible man to make up that I felt pretty sure it must be true."

Miss Randolph put down her pen and gave herself up to the business of listening.

"If I could tell you how that little woman looked," declared Persis, "it would just make your heart

jump to think it was you that helped her. Only six months married, she was, too. Well, I took a risk and wrote to Mr. Thompson, Cleveland, and when I got his letter I knew everything was all right. But I wasn't sure of proving it to young Mrs. Thompson. After a woman's brooded over a thing as long as she had, with her neighbors egging her on to do something desperate, she's not going to be convinced with anything short of downright proof. But between your letter and Mr. Wash—"

"I don't see," interrupted Miss Randolph quickly, "that she has anything to thank me for. You certainly deserve all the credit, Miss Dale, for clearing up the mystery."

"Well, they were grateful all right," Persis smiled reminiscently. "The baby's six weeks old now, and her name is Persis Dale Thompson. And they're both about as happy as any folks you're likely to see till you die and go to Heaven. But I couldn't have done anything without your help, and I wish I thought you was half as contented as I know they are."

"Really," said Miss Randolph, with an unsuccessful attempt to duplicate her earlier reserve, "it is impossible for me to see—"

"Yes, I know." Persis leaned toward her, speak-

ing with a vehemence that swept the feeble expostulation aside. "But just because I never set eyes on you before ain't any reason why I shouldn't want you to be happy. I've laid awake nights thinking about that letter of yours, so loving and so sorrowful. Dearie, if love pulls you one way and conscience the other, there's only one thing to do and that's the right thing."

"Really," began Miss Randolph, and then her eyes unexpectedly filled, quenching the incipient fire of her indignation. She had recourse to her handkerchief and Persis patted her shoulder, and in that instant the two were friends.

"You don't quite understand," explained Enid in a muffled voice. "'Tommy' isn't married. 'Her' is auntie."

Persis drew a sigh of such unmistakable relief that the girl looked at her amazed. The older woman's face was shining.

"Well, that's a weight off my mind," she smiled. "Nothing but your aunt. Thank goodness."

"A weight off your mind!" Enid repeated. "But you didn't know me."

"No, but I knew you were a young thing in trouble, and that 'Her' gave me many a bad minute."

Enid's fingers reached gropingly toward her new-

found friend. Their two hands clasped and held fast.

"Auntie took me when I was a little girl. I was an orphan. She's been everything to me, and she adores me. But she doesn't like Tommy."

"Why not?"

"She hasn't anything really against him except that he's poor. It would kill her to have me leave her to marry him. I can't bring myself to do it. And yet I can't bring myself to give Tommy up." She was crying in earnest now, and the clasp of Persis' hand tightened.

"You can't and you oughtn't. There's too much sacrifice of love these days. Young fellows instead of having homes of their own are supporting two or three grown-up sisters and getting crabbed and bitter. And girls the Lord meant for wives and mothers stay at home because the old folks don't want to spare them. Nine times out of ten it's like Abraham sacrificing Isaac, and there's a he-goat somewhere round in the bushes that would do just as well."

"But it would seem so dreadfully ungrateful to disappoint her," gasped Enid Randolph with the air of one who longs to be disproved. "After she's done everything for me."

"Bless you, child, if you love and are sure of him, the mother who bore you wouldn't have a right to say no. And what's more, if you're sensible enough to go your own way, she'll probably end up by thinking he next thing to made the world and taking all the credit for the match. You're twenty-one, of course."

"Twenty-three."

"Then I wouldn't have any more of this underhanded business. Talk it out with your aunt, and unless she can show you good reasons for giving up your young man, you've got the best reason in the world for taking him."

Enid deliberated. Then very slowly she tore her letter to bits.

"I was saying good-by to him forever—for the twenty-ninth time." She smiled somewhat palely. "But I rather think, Miss Persis Dale, that I'll take your advice."

CHAPTER XVIII

A STALLED ENGINE

"WELL, I don't expect to be any nearer flying till I get to Heaven and they fit me to a pair of wings. I might try a little jaunt in an air-ship some day, but I don't feel as if I'd relish that for a steady diet. For this world, an automobile is plenty good enough for me."

Not for many a year had Persis been possessed by such a sense of buoyancy and youthfulness. The road lay straight and smooth before her. The little car, obedient to her strong capable hand, spun along the shining track, counterfeiting by the swiftness of its motion the breeze lacking in the languid spring day. Persis had laid aside her hat, and the rush of air ruffled her abundant hair and rouged her cheeks. As a matter of fact, Persis was not so near flying as she thought. In the most conservative community, there would have been little danger of her arrest for exceeding the speed limit. But to one accustomed to the sedate jog-trot of

farm horses taken from the plow to hitch to the capacious carry-all, the ten-mile-an-hour gait of the new motor seemed exhilarating flight.

The day had the deceptive stillness by which nature disguises the ferocious intensity of her springtime activities. Bird, beast and insensate clod all felt the challenge of the season. Persis had responded characteristically by cleaning house from six o'clock till noon and making a dress for Betty in the interval which less strenuous natures devote to afternoon naps. And now that Celia was off somewhere with Joel, and Betty had promised to look after the baby, and the boys had received permission to inspect a family of puppies newly arrived in the neighborhood, Persis was scurrying hither and thither with all the ebullient lightheartedness of a girl let out of school. She had startled the staid residents of Twin Rivers, where the spectacle of a woman driving a car ranked in interest second only to a circus parade. She had frightened two horses and narrowly escaped running over a chicken. And now she turned her face homeward, with the deliberate intention of ignoring the approach of supper-time and inviting young Mrs. Thompson to take the baby out for an airing. At no other time of

the year would Persis have considered being late to supper for no reason except that she was loath to shorten her pleasure. Without doubt the momentous interview between Mother Eve and the most subtle of beasts occurred in the spring when the moral defenses need reinforcement.

Against the deepening gold of the west, a black speck showed, emerging rapidly into distinctness as the vehicles approached. The slower-moving of the two was still at too great a distance for Persis to distinguish its occupants when she began to slow down, her dread of causing an accident through frightening some one's horse counteracting her unwonted feeling of irresponsibility. The car had come almost to a standstill when out of the recesses of the still distant buggy Persis caught a flash of pink. She had the trained eye for color characteristic of her profession. And this peculiarly trying shade of pink she always associated with Diantha Sinclair, who had an audacious fondness for testing her flawless coloring with hues capable of turning the ordinary complexion to saffron.

Prompt action is characteristic of the intuitive. Logic takes time. Persis never attempted to account for the unreasoning certainty which on occasion took command of her actions. It was impossible for her

to recognize Diantha's companion or to know indeed, that the opalescent flash of pink stood for Diantha's nearness. Yet she was sure of both things and of much besides. And with her conviction that the case was serious, an adequate plan of action instantly presented itself.

The car stopped with a jerk, and in the middle of the road, so that the on-coming driver would have to exercise caution in passing. The panting engine became silent. Persis alighted. She made several tours of inspection of her property, her face expressive of gravest concern. Occasionally she touched a screw or lever tentatively and then shook her head. Finally dropping on her knees in the dust, she thrust her head between the wheels and gazed inquiringly at the bottom of the car. Thus occupied she was too engrossed to notice that the thud of horse's hoofs was coming very near. Suddenly the sound ceased.

"Why," cried a girlish voice, "it's Miss Persis."

Persis gave up her unvailing scrutiny and climbed slowly to her feet. As she dusted her knees, she welcomed the occupants of the buggy with a fine blending of surprise and relief.

"Well, I venture to say I know just how shipwrecked folks feel when they're off on a raft in mid-

ocean and they sight a sail. Ain't this a funny fix, half past four in the afternoon and me ten miles from home? And to make it worse I wrenched my knee a mite cleaning house this morning." This last statement was strictly accurate though her limp as she advanced toward them was exaggerated. "I don't know what I'd have done," declared Persis, "if you hadn't happened along."

Diantha's face reflected the pinkness of the gown which had betrayed her. Thad West looked frankly sulky and quite at a loss.

"That's the worst of those dog-goned things," he exclaimed, scowling at the object blocking his way. "They're always giving out just when you need them most. I wouldn't take one as a gift," he added savagely, and only the enthusiastic motorist will understand what it cost Persis not to refute his words on the spot.

"Have you tried everything you can think of to make it go, Miss Persis?" Diantha asked, her troubled tones indicating how much she took to heart her friend's misadventure.

Persis' glance implied affectionate appreciation.

"Well, you see, dearie, they gave me lessons in the city on how to run a car, but I suppose it's too much to expect that I'll know everything about it

right off from the start. I dare say some real smart person could fix it in a jiffy." She was so certain on this point that she quaked for fear Thad might begin experimenting, but that young man's confidence in his mechanical ability was luckily limited. He sat scowling and twisting the lines in his hands, while his horse looked back over its shoulder as if it shared its master's impatience of the delay.

"I didn't relish the idea of setting here in the road all night," explained Persis, still with an air of relief. "Seems fairly providential your coming along in the nick o' time."

"Fact is," said Thad sullenly, "we're not going home for a while."

"Well, I'm in no real hurry," Persis returned obligingly. "If the children get hungry, Mary'll feed 'em. They're all too little to worry if I'm not home on the minute, and Joel ain't the worrying kind."

"Truth is, Miss Persis," exclaimed the goaded lad, "it isn't what you'd call convenient for us to take you along this evening."

"Thad!" cried Diantha in accents of unutterable reproach.

"Well, I don't mean to be impolite, but it's *not* convenient and you know it."

"Thad West, Miss Persis is just about my dearest friend in Clematis. And if you think I'm going to leave her here alone ten miles from home, with an automobile that won't go—and getting dark—and a lame knee—"

"Well, of course if you feel that way about it," returned the unhappy young man, "there's nothing more to be said. But you know yourself—"

"I guess I'd better light my lamps before I leave," remarked Persis briskly. She attended to that little matter and hobbled toward the buggy. Thad alighted and assisted her to climb in with so poor a grace as to make her suspicions an absolute certainty.

"Now, children," Persis settled herself and slipping an arm deftly behind Thad's back, she took Diantha's slim hand in hers, "I never was one to be a kill-joy. You drive round as long as you feel like it and don't mind me, no more'n if I was a coach dog running on behind."

"Thad!" exclaimed Diantha in peremptory fashion. "I'm going to tell her."

"Just as you think best," replied young Mr. West, who bade fair to find this a convenient stock phrase.

Diantha's hand gave that of Persis a tremulous pressure, suggestive of fluttering nerves. "Miss Persis," she said in a thrilling half-whisper, "we're going to be married, Thad and I."

Persis returned the squeeze. "I thought as much, dearie. I've seen you look at him and him look at you, and that made it plain enough to a body with eyes. And I'm glad to hear it. For all I've missed it myself, I believe marriage is about the best thing there is. Thad's got his faults and you've got yours, and it stands to reason you're going to do better at mastering 'em if each helps the other, than if you struggle along alone. There's nothing easy about marriage except for lazy folks and cowards, but things that are hard are the only ones that pay. Some people will tell you it's a risk, and so it is, but most things are when you come to that. I believe in getting married and in early marriages, too, and so I'm glad to know that some day you and Thad—"

Thad West gave his horse a quite unnecessary cut with the whip. In the voice of a dying zephyr, Diantha interrupted.

"You don't understand, Miss Persis. It isn't some day. It's to-day. We're running off to be married."

"Oh!" Persis' hold on the fluttering little hand tightened. Her silence seemed to imply reflection.

"Well, that puts a different face on it. I suppose it's because I think so much of marriage that I hate to have it mixed up with things that are underhanded. My idea of husband and wife, you see, is just two folks helping each other to make a better man and a better woman, instead of backing each other up in lying—"

"Lying!" exploded Thad. "Who's going to do any lying?"

"Diantha's not eighteen yet, and you haven't got her parents' permission for her to marry you. The only way you can manage it is to lie about her age and start your new life with that hanging over you. And all because you can't wait one little year. Looks like Thad's afraid he will change his mind about Diantha, and Diantha's in a hurry for fear she will find somebody she likes better'n Thad."

Two vehement protests mingled in inextricable confusion. "They won't let me see her except on the sly," cried Thad, making himself heard at last. "They've said I wasn't to come to the house. And I won't stand it."

"Of course you won't," Persis agreed. "That's past all reason that two young people dead in love

with each other aren't to have a chance to do their courting. That's got to be different."

"But father won't have it."

"To-morrow I'm going to drop in and have a talk with your father. I'm not afraid of obstinacy in a man that's got ordinary sense somewhere in the back of his head. It's the brainless sort of folks that can't be moved after they've once got set. Stanley Sinclair knows enough to listen to reason. And he's got to do it."

"But mother," began Diantha, and then sobbed. His face sternly set, Thad gulped. Even the self-contained Persis found her eyes moist.

"Yes, child, I understand. I knew your mother before you were born, and I'll own that we're likely to have a little trouble in that quarter. But when folks have common sense and everything else dead against 'em, there's nothing for 'em to do but give up. Sometimes I've felt," Persis added thoughtfully, "as if I'd just enjoy a real plain talk with your mother."

"If we go back now," stormed Thad, "it'll be the same story over again next year. They're never going to let me marry Diantha unless I run off with her."

"Next year she'll be of age and her own mistress,

and you'll have no cause to run. Diantha's the sort of girl that ought to be married in church with bridesmaids and the wedding march and pews full of folks looking on. 'Tain't only about once in a generation that a bride as pretty as Diantha comes along, and the idea of marrying her in some minister's back parlor, with the student lamp turned low to save oil and the servant girl called in for a witness, is a plain case of casting pearls before swine. Not that I've got anything against ministers," Persis added, in hasty amends to the cloth.

The weeping Diantha was sobbing less violently. Persis was sure she was giving close attention. Possibly Thad was impressed by the same view of the case, for he spoke with the aggressive confidence of one who feels that his cause is imperiled.

"Church wedding! Makes me laugh to think what Diantha's mother would say to that."

"Well, if they won't give Diantha a wedding next year, I will. And it'll be the kind," Persis promised solemnly, "that'll make Clematis sit up and take notice."

Neither of the lovers spoke. Gazing down the winding road with the dreamy air of one who sees beautiful visions, Persis broke the tense silence.

"I've given up dressmaking for good, but there's

one dress I'm willing to break my rule for, and that's Diantha Sinclair's wedding gown. I've got a picture of it in my mind's eye, if the styles don't change too much between now and next June. And if anything could make Diantha look sweeter than she does now, 'twould be that wedding dress. And the making of it ain't going to cost her a cent."

Diantha leaned behind Thad's back and left a damp kiss on her friend's forehead. Persis knew her battle was won. Thad knew it too, and a hollow groan escaped him.

"By the way, Thad, I'm going to arrange with Mr. Sinclair to let you call on Diantha twice a week, and if you should happen to feel like seeing her between times, she's pretty likely to be at my house along in the afternoon. If you should drop in 'most any day about four o'clock, you'd probably find her. And now s'pose both of you come home with me for supper. I'll telephone Diantha's folks where she is, so they won't worry."

"I think—I think that'll be awfully nice, don't you, Thad?" said Diantha.

And the loser in the unequal contest surrendered without a blow as he answered, "Just as you say."

Persis had not overestimated her persuasive pow-

ers. She actually brought the Sinclairs to agree to the liberal terms she had promised the young people. The hauteur with which Stanley Sinclair received her at his office the following day, and the explicitness of his statement that he was not anxious for her advice concerning his domestic affairs, proved unavailing before Persis' matter-of-fact bluntness. Anger availed him little since she remained cool. His irony rebounded harmless from her absolute certainty of being in the right. Forced to retreat step by step, he ended by conceding all that she demanded for the lovers. If he had an air when he bade her good morning, of resolving never to forgive her, the knowledge that she had gained all she came for imparted an unfeigned cordiality to her farewell.

The interview with Annabel was briefer and more dramatic, but quite as conclusive. As she pondered on the success that had attended her efforts, Persis indulged in brief philosophy.

"Anybody's at a terrible disadvantage that's afraid of the truth. Now, it doesn't worry me a mite to have Annabel call me an old maid, but if I tell her she's thirty-eight she feels worse than if I'd stuck a knife into her. Annabel makes me think of those squirming things that live under stones. All you

have to do to bring 'em to terms is to turn the stone over and let the light in on 'em. It beats all how Annabel will scramble to get away from the truth."

The man commissioned to bring home Persis Dale's car relished his task enormously. He told every one that there wasn't a thing the matter with the machine. She had just stalled her engine and didn't know enough to get it started again. All Clematis enjoyed the joke, Persis in particular.

CHAPTER XIX

A DEFERRED INTERMENT

EXCEPT for the clerk at the Clematis House the first person to welcome Justin Ware on his next return to his native town was Annabel Sinclair. She wore a little white veil, vastly becoming, but masking a tragedy, since she thereby acknowledged the deterioration of her complexion. The dramatic encounter took place one block from the hotel, and Annabel clasping her gloved hands uttered the single word, "You!"

The greeting, abrupt in type, is anything else on the lips of a woman who has studied the possibilities of that monosyllable. On Annabel's lips it expressed incredulous wonder, gentle reproach and strong feeling held in check by womanly modesty. No man can rise superior to this subtle flattery. Justin greeted her as if she were the woman of his dreams.

"It's really you—after almost a year." The reproach was uppermost in her voice now, but she

mitigated its severity by allowing him to retain possession of the hand he had seized.

"It has been a long year—for me," replied Justin, and the rival artist thrilled with responsive admiration. For his manner said as plainly as words that throughout those dragging twelve months one thought had possessed him, the desire to see her again.

"Were you on your way home? May I walk with you?" He asked the favor with deferential tenderness. She granted it with an effective flutter of the lids. Each, realizing the other's proficiency in the game, was spurred to emulation.

And then abrptly the curtain dropped on the play, for at the first street corner, an automobile barked a warning. Justin, who had gallantly taken his companion's arm, the better to assist her in the perils of the crossing, raised his eyes and at once lost interest in Annabel Sinclair and her kind.

The woman driving the car to all appearances had not recognized him, her absorption preventing her from differentiating the human species beyond the broad classification of those likely to be run over and those in no such danger. Her color was high, and her face despite a grim intentness indicated keen satisfaction. A handsome boy sat beside her,

and Justin had a confused impression of a number of other children in charge of a buxom girl on the back seat. He stood motionless gazing after the flying car and oblivious to Annabel's resentful glances.

"Well, good afternoon if you've decided to spend the rest of the day on the street corner."

Justin roused himself. But he had lost heart in these amateur theatricals.

"Whose car is Persis Dale driving?"

"Her own. A year brings changes, you see, Mr. Ware. The car and the children all belong to her."

"What!" he shouted. His first not unnatural idea was that Persis had become the wife of a prosperous widower, and he was astonished at the pang for which this thought was responsible. Resentfully Annabel recognized the difference between the voice of real emotion and counterfeit tenderness.

Her lips curled as she allayed his consternation. "She came into a little money—an obliging aunt died, I believe. Pity it hadn't come early enough to do her some real good. She patched up her old house, and adopted five or six orphan-asylum kids, and I suppose the poor thing thinks she's having a good time." Even to the most prejudiced eye Annabel could not have looked beautiful at that mo-

ment. The venom that poisoned her spirit, disfigured her face like a scar. Hag-ridden by those unlovely twins, jealousy and hate, she looked for the instant prematurely old.

Justin did not notice. He was absorbed in gleaning from her all possible information as to the change in Persis' circumstances and quite indifferent to the emotions of his reluctant informant. With the relentlessness of the thoroughly selfish, he continued his cross-examination till Annabel's mind seemed to herself a squeezed orange. She felt something like terror mingling with a sense of physical exhaustion. It always frightened her to find herself unable to keep a man's attention focused on herself when she had him to herself.

"When shall I see you again?" she asked, as she approached her home. Had the interview continued with the dramatic intensity of its beginning, she could safely have left him to ask that question. Under the circumstances she did not dare.

"I'm not quite sure. I have some business that has hung fire an unconscionable time, and ungallant as it seems, we twentieth century fellows have to put business before pleasure." He smiled propitiatingly and therein lay the sting, that he did not even take the trouble to conceal that he was trying to

appease her. Their parting sank to the level of the commonplace for he shook hands hastily, and her look of appeal flattened itself ineffectively against his preoccupation.

A little skilful quizzing of the hotel clerk confirmed in every detail Annabel's remarkable story, and in his own room Justin sat down to think the matter through to a conclusion. The renewal of his acquaintance with Persis Dale nearly a year earlier had enlightened him as to the tenacity of certain impressions he had thought obliterated long before. The girl he had loved in his callow youth and had forgotten, still retained something of her old fascination for him. A year earlier this discovery was responsible for an amused wonder at himself, coupled with a realization of the need of caution. Now common sense took sides with his lingering fondness. Persis Dale, with a comfortable little fortune added to her unique personality, had become distinctly desirable. She was a woman with an infinite capacity for surprises, which meant that she would not bore the man she married, unduly. With a little metropolitan polish added to her native cleverness she should be able to give a good account of herself socially. The children were a drawback of course, but there must be some way of getting

rid of an adopted family of which one tired. And it was quite impossible that Persis' fondness for the little ones she had picked up the other day, so to speak, would prove a serious rival to an affection which had been a vital factor in her life for more than twenty years.

By supper-time he had made up his mind. With a little sigh for the freedom he was relinquishing, he resolved on matrimony. He had always intended to marry somebody and domesticity with Persis promised at least commonplace comfort, something Justin was the last man on earth to despise. With the children disposed of, Joel sent adrift and Persis' money wisely handled, there was no reason why they should not get on better than the majority of married people. Justin ate an unusually hearty supper as if to fortify himself for his wooing.

He had made up his mind to ignore the change in Persis' circumstances that his call might seem a spontaneous tribute to her personal attractions. But the change in the house and its furnishings was so pronounced that he judged it bad policy to pass it over without comment. "I thought for a minute I'd come to the wrong house, Persis, and I felt positively alarmed about myself. I knew if I couldn't

find the Dale place blindfolded, I needed the services of a nerve specialist." He laughed a little with an air of catching himself up before he had said too much, something he had found effective with many women.

She smiled upon him gravely. "It was the improvements that mixed you up, I suppose. There was a spot on the ceiling of mother's room where the rain leaked through the winter she died. After the papering was finished I missed that spot as if it had been human. Time and again when I went into that room I'd jump as if I'd got into somebody else's house by mistake." Her voice lost a subtle pensive quality as she added: "But the new furniture ain't the best of the changes, Justin. I wish I could show you the children, but they're all in bed and asleep."

"I'm not sure I'm sorry." Justin's voice was low and caressing. "It's always been hard for us two to have any time alone. I used to wonder when I came here who would be sitting by and listening to every word we said, your father or your mother or Joel or some other young fellow who'd discovered the most charming girl in Clematis. If fate has granted us an evening to ourselves at last, let's be thankful."

He thought it a very fair beginning. The refer-

ence to their early love affair could not fail to soften her. The implication that the interference of interested third parties was responsible for keeping them apart was cleverly done. It was a distinct surprise at the end of an hour to find himself no further along than at the start. Justin had no intention of offering his hand and heart to any woman without a reasonable assurance of a rapturous acceptance, and singularly enough, he was far from certainty. He had been making love in a restrained and subtle fashion for the better part of an hour and was ready for an avowal of his devotion as soon as Persis showed any intention of meeting him half-way. But up to this point, she had skilfully disguised any such intention, and while showing no displeasure at the sentimental tendency disclosed in his remark, had so persistently injected a tincture of matter-of factness into the conversation that he seemed as far as ever from coming to the point. With it all, her air was friendly. He suspected her of playing with him, taking her revenge by keeping him in doubt overnight.

Resistance seldom detracts from a woman's value in a man's eyes. When Justin rose to go he was almost ready to believe himself in love. He was a little angry, slightly amused and more in doubt as

to her state of mind than he often felt regarding his opponents in the eternal duel. When Persis gave him her hand for good night he held it in both his own for a moment and raised it to his lips. The curious rekindling of a burned-out tenderness, due to her lack of responsiveness, gave the act an effect of sincerity which impressed him, even while he thrilled with honest passion, as an excellent move.

He looked into her eyes and found them gravely contemplative. "Justin," she said, "there's something I want to speak to you about if you're not in a hurry."

He tingled with triumph. Women were all alike. She could play the coquette for an hour, but she could not let him leave her till she had heard the words he had been trying all the evening to speak. He put down his hat. "You know of course," he said with an air of repressed feeling, "that I am at your service now and always." And as her eyes fell he laid his hand on hers.

It was not easy to restore the balance, but Persis did it. "The property my aunt left me," she began in her most matter-of-fact voice, "brings me a pretty fair income, but nothing's good enough as long as it might be better. Only yesterday I got an offer of ten thousand dollars for some water-works

stock in a place out West where Aunt Persis Ann lived for a good many years."

Justin put his hands in his pockets, the character of her opening rendering sentimental advances ludicrously inopportune.

"Have you any idea what income you get from that stock?"

" Last year it was a thousand and fifty dollars."

"Why, that's over ten per cent. on what the fellow offers you," Justin exclaimed, and Persis nodded.

"Yes, about ten per cent. And in the Apple of Eden Investment Company I'd be guaranteed twenty-five per cent. by the tenth year, with a good chance to double my money even before that. I didn't stop you to ask your advice, Justin, for I can see you'd feel a little delicate about urging me to invest in your company. But what I've heard from Mis' Hornblower makes it plain enough that the best thing for me to do is to turn my property into cash as fast as I can and put every penny into apples."

Justin crossed his feet, reflecting impatiently that it was high time for Persis Dale to have a husband. His elation over all that was implied by her consulting him on so personal a matter, was almost lost in his feeling of annoyance. This made it plain that

he must lose no time, but marry her offhand. What with her penchant for orphans and for foolish investments, she would make ducks and drakes of her fortune unless a man peremptorily took the helm.

"It would be a pity to be precipitate, Persis. An investment that pays ten per cent. isn't to be sneezed at nowadays. And this fellow's offer just now looks as if the stock wasn't in any danger of depreciating."

He glanced at her and was annoyed to find her face stubborn. Had she been the type of woman to accept masculine counsel as akin to divine guidance, his task would have been easier. Her evident lack of yielding forced him to take a superior tone.

"My dear girl, you will admit that I am a little better versed in business matters than you are. And my advice is to hold on to your stock unless you should have a better reason for selling than appears at present."

"Ten per cent. looks pretty well alongside the savings bank, I'll admit. But why shouldn't I get twenty-five? I've got these children to educate. I can use considerable more than if I just had myself to think of."

He gulped down his vexation. "Raising apples is a science, Persis. The weakness of the American investor is to imagine that he can do whatever any

other fellow has done. Because some horticultural shark doubles his money on his orchard in a banner year, you fancy you can do the same every year."

"Gracious, Justin! I'm not going into apple-raising. I've got my hands full enough without that. I'm going to leave the company to run my orchard for me. All they ask is twenty-five per cent. of the net profits, but you know that without my telling you."

"And suppose there comes a year like 1896, when apples didn't bring enough to pay for the barrels they were packed in? You can't count on top-notch prices every season."

"No, but I can count on the company's guarantee."

An oath, a tribute to her obstinacy, winged through his brain. In his exasperation he forgot caution.

"That guarantee—"

"Well?"

"There's nothing to hold us after you've become the owner of the property. If we find that running your orchard isn't profitable, as we might easily do after one or two bad seasons, we could slip from under, and you could use the guarantee as you call it, for curl papers. That's all it would be good for."

He was glad to see that he had shaken her foolish stubbornness at last. She caught her breath like one jerked back from an unrealized danger by a friendly hand.

"I—I guess it's lucky I consulted you, Justin. It's foolish for a woman to think that she's up to all the tricks in business nowadays." The slight trembling of her hand tempted him to kiss it, though he compromised by merely taking it again.

"If I've helped you a little, Persis, dear girl, I'm very happy. I only wish you were willing to make use of me always." His hope that this was the psychological moment was dashed when ignoring the attempted caress, she grasped his hand and shook it vigorously.

"Good night, Justin. Thank you for setting me right in that matter. I believe that's the baby starting to cry. I'll have to hurry up before she rouses the house."

But she got no farther than the foot of the stairs on this errand, and Justin, letting himself out, gave voice to the oath he had thought more than once that evening. Persis stood listening as he made his way down the walk, but up-stairs all was still. She returned to the living-room rather slowly. Through all the various changes in the household,

indicative of increased prosperity, the photograph in the blue plush frame had triumphantly retained its post of honor on the mantel, a landmark of constancy. Now she took it up with hands that trembled.

"It's not that I've got anything against you." She addressed it as if there were an intelligence back of the vacuous pleasantness of the young face. "It's only that there's not any *you* and hasn't been for I don't know how long. It's so much deader than death, all ashes to ashes and dust to dust and the spirit turned into something different." And then Justin's hopes would have soared high had he seen her, for she kissed the lips that smiled at her, a strange kiss in which pity blended with forgiveness.

Holding fast to the blue plush frame, Persis passed through the house to the woodshed, found a trowel among the garden tools, and then made her way into the night. The sky was overcast, hiding the stars, but the flitting fire-flies outlined strange constellations against the velvety darkness. Persis groped her way through the dewy grass toward the syringa bush, guided as much by the odor of blossoms as by sight, and falling on her knees used her trowel industriously for many minutes. And when the grave was deep enough, she laid the plush frame

into its recesses, hiding the smile she once had loved with heaped-up earth. Since so many of her girlish hopes were covered by that same earth, it is not strange that her tears fell upon the little mound.

"I'm going to miss that picture same as if it was alive. It was always smiling so cheerful that it cheered me just to look at it. But when a thing's dead, it ought to be buried, and as it is, I guess this funeral is pretty near twenty years behind time."

CHAPTER XX

CHECKMATE

IN spite of the lack of success which had attended his tentative wooing, Justin Ware slept soundly, woke cheerful and made a comfortable breakfast. Over his coffee and pancakes he outlined not the plans for a systematic siege of Persis' affections, but the maneuver through which he hoped to carry the Hornblower citadel by storm. He had used no meaningless figure of speech when he assured Annabel of his practise of making pleasure secondary to business. Robert Hornblower's resistance had piqued and baffled him, the more as he knew that Mrs. Hornblower was his uncompromising ally. Indeed his presence in Clematis at this juncture was due to a letter from this invaluable colleague, casually mentioning that her husband had received an offer for the farm which she wished he might be induced to accept. "While I leave all such matters for Robert to decide, as I consider to be a wife's *plain* duty," wrote Mrs. Hornblower, with a

lavish use of italics, "I have not hesitated to tell him that I think his closing with the offer is for the *best* interests of us all." And Justin had interpreted the communication to mean that his confederate believed the day of victory at hand.

He finished his breakfast at an early hour, judged by metropolitan standards, selected the most promising animal from the sorry exhibition of horse-flesh in the local livery and drove out to the Hornblower farm, smoking on the way a better cigar than could be bought in Clematis, and feeling unusually well satisfied with the world and himself. His failure to bring the Hornblower affair to a successful conclusion had annoyed him, not so much because of the importance of the transaction, as because his professional pride was hurt at finding himself unequal to the task of convincing a henpecked old man. From the tone of Mrs. Hornblower's letter he was confident this failure was about to be retrieved, and that Persis would prove amenable to his flattering advances, could be taken for granted. On one point he must be firm. From the beginning he must assume the necessity of her renouncing her recently acquired family. He could say and with truth that children made him nervous. But to postpone the settlement of the difficulty until after

the wedding would be a fatal blunder. When women felt sure of a man, they sometimes developed a disagreeable tenacity in holding to their own way. Altogether on this early morning drive, Justin's difficulties dwindled almost to imperceptible points while his blessings loomed large, a state of mind we are assured, most favorable to success.

Mr. Hornblower came from the barn as he drove up and greeted him with successfully disguised cordiality. But a glance convinced Justin that the long siege was nearly at an end. In the pouches under the man's weary eyes, in a certain sagging of his lower lip, in an indefinable air of being beaten, Justin read the signs of approaching capitulation.

"Mis' Hornblower is in the house. I guess you'd better see her this morning. I'm pretty busy for visiting."

"I won't keep you long, Mr. Hornblower. I just want to lay a proposition before you that's sure to interest as good a business man as you are." Justin waited while the farmer tied the horse, and then, slipping his hand through the old man's arm, guided him dexterously around the house. Robert Hornblower yielded like one hypnotized, an expression of rigid horror on his face as if while seeing some

peril immediately ahead, he found himself unable to avoid it.

Mrs. Hornblower sat in a rocking-chair by the window, tapping the floor with her heel as the chair swayed, and nervously smoothing imaginary wrinkles from an immaculate apron. Justin took a step toward her, then stopped with an awkward jerk. Early as he was, another caller was ahead of him. In the opposite corner, grim and unsmiling as fate, sat Persis Dale.

Justin realized his own embarrassment with angry wonder. He had the emotions of a boy caught in a foray on the preserve closet. "Good morning," he said, and was shocked by the startled suspicion of his own voice. He carried out his original intention of shaking hands with Mrs. Hornblower, though without his customary grace of manner, and then turned to go through the same ceremony with Persis, but her tightly folded arms gave little encouragement to this design. He compromised by taking a chair near her and saying pleasantly, "You're an early arrival."

"I calculated you'd be here as soon as you got done your breakfast," Persis replied, and left him to interpret the ambiguous remark as he pleased.

Justin's career had not been of a sort to cultivate undue sensitiveness. A moment sufficed to make him master of himself. "I came out to discuss a little business proposition with Mr. Hornblower," he explained carelessly. "But I don't want to interfere with the enjoyment of you ladies. Some other time—"

"Don't mind me," interposed Persis. "Mis' Hornblower and I haven't anything special to talk about. We're interested in your business proposition, both of us."

"I don't know as I care to hear it," interrupted Mr. Hornblower, speaking with a certain wildness, an indication that he had almost reached the limit of resistance. His voice was shrill and unnatural. "All I want is to be left in peace on the farm where my father lived and died before me."

"Robert," said the submissive Mrs. Hornblower witheringly, "I'd be ashamed to talk as if I'd been born an oyster instead of a man."

"Of course, Mr. Hornblower," Ware began soothingly, "I should be very unwilling to overpersuade you. If my proposition does not commend itself to your own good judgment, you are perfectly justified in turning it down. Or if you are not in

the mood for talking business to-day, some other time—"

"There's no time like the present," said Persis Dale. "And if you don't like what he's got to offer, you can say no, Mr. Hornblower, and stick to it. Your *no* is as good as his *yes,* I'm sure, when it's your business that's being talked of."

She had suddenly become the dominant figure in the room. Mrs. Hornblower glanced at her uncertainly. The promoter smiled propitiatingly. The old man shuffled toward her with an evident hope that through proximity he might profit by her sturdy strength.

"I don't mind listening, Persis," he said tremulously. "I'm a reasonable man. What I object to is being nagged and badgered as if I didn't have a right to say my soul was my own."

"I'm sure, Mr. Hornblower," Ware interrupted, "that Miss Dale will tell you that I have no wish to hurry you into any decision you will regret. In our business, satisfied patrons are our best asset. I only want to call attention to a little matter that may have escaped your attention and then leave you to think it over." Though his remarks were addressed to the farmer, his appealing gaze was fixed

on Persis. He was disagreeably uncertain as to her attitude. Possibly she had come with the purpose of doing him a favor. And possibly— But he dismissed the alternative before it had taken shape in his thoughts. On the evening before he had made plain his willingness to take up their acquaintance just where it had left off, twenty years before. And if he knew anything of women, nothing would induce her to imperil the renewal of that relation.

In spite of this conviction his manner showed embarrassment as he began his explanation. The smooth phrases he had used so often that he could have spoken them in his sleep came readily to his lips, but even to himself they sounded hollow and unconvincing. He was embarrassed too, by Persis' tendency to ask questions, to inform herself as to every detail of the plan he was unfolding. So persistent was she in her cross-examination, that Mrs. Hornblower showed signs of irritation.

"Goodness, Persis, it ain't necessary for Mr. Ware to go into all those points. It ain't as if this was the first time we had ever talked over the matter."

"It's just as well to have things plain," Persis replied imperturbably. Justin noticed that she

looked less youthful and comely than on the occasions when he had previously seen her. She had the gray and care-worn look excusable in a woman approaching the fortieth mile-stone who has spent a wakeful night. He was conscious of a sense of annoyance in noting the distinctness of the triangle formed by her firm mouth and the lines that slanted obliquely back from its corners. Her persistence, too, troubled him. He was well aware that there is no more serious flaw in a wife than the habit of asking questions.

In spite of interruptions he finally finished his story and folded the papers from which he had used certain figures to give his statements an authoritative air. Mr. Hornblower squirmed uneasily, looking at Persis as if appealing for help.

"As I said before, Mr. Hornblower," Justin assured him with an air of gentle consideration, "I am not at all desirous of hurrying you in the matter. If you prefer to think over what I have said, and then when you reach a decision—"

"I don't see," exclaimed Mrs. Hornblower, from her seat near the window, "why it shouldn't be settled to-day. We've got a good offer for the farm now, but if Robert keeps Mr. Jeffreys hanging by

the gills, the chances are that he'll satisfy himself somewhere else. And it isn't as though we hadn't talked this over from A to izzard."

"You've got to make up your mind sometimes," Persis Dale corroborated her. "I always feel as if 'twas a relief to get a thing settled."

Mrs. Hornblower who up to this moment had seemed to regard Persis' presence as an affront, smiled upon her almost affectionately. Robert Hornblower had an air of feeling himself deserted. Justin was not sure.

"But before you get the thing all settled and signed," Persis continued smoothly, "there's one little thing I'd like to have Mr. Ware explain. If this investment is such a good thing for you, why isn't it just as good for me?"

A tense silence followed which Mrs. Hornblower broke. "For you?" She pushed her spectacles up on her forehead as if she found the lenses an obstruction to vision rather than an aid. "Have you—have you been thinking of putting any money into apples?"

"I asked him last night about investing ten thousand dollars in this company. He talked against it—strong. He gave me to understand that if I was getting ten per cent. on my money I was lucky."

Justin sat with his eyes on the floor, making no effort to explain. It was checkmate, and he knew it. The love of his youth had played with him, tricked him, used him for her purposes even while he believed her on the point of capitulation. It was small consolation at that moment to realize that greater men had lost greater stakes through that little illusion of being irresistible to the sex. He turned sick with humiliation, hot with hate. He had prided himself on his sophistication, and this country woman had laid a trap for him into which he had obligingly blundered. To attempt an explanation would be folly. Checkmate!

"Ten per cent.!" Mrs. Hornblower's voice rose shrill and frightened. "Why, in the Apple of Eden Investment Company—"

"Yes, I reminded him about the twenty-five per cent. by the tenth year, and he laughed at me. Said the guarantee you set such store by might as well be used for curl papers, if the company got sick of its bargain."

"Why don't you say something?" Mrs. Hornblower turned on Justin furiously. "What do you mean by letting her run on in this crazy fashion and never wagging your tongue?" Underneath her anger sounded a note of despair. No one who knew

Persis Dale ever doubted her absolute truth. And unless she had lied the thing was beyond explanation.

Before Justin could reply, Robert Hornblower was on his feet. Another startling transformation had come over the old man. Years and decrepitude fell from him like a discarded garment. As he advanced upon Justin, his fists clenched, he actually looked a formidable figure.

"You get out of my house, you sneaking lying swindler. You clear out and never open your head to me one word about your damned old company or I'll—"

"Robert!" shrieked Mrs. Hornblower in hysterical protest.

Ware rose with as much dignity as the situation permitted. Few men can feel themselves the target of the scorn of three honest people and not wince, and Justin, whatever his weaknesses, did not lack sensibility.

"If you wish to accept Miss Dale's version of the matter, it is immaterial to me. I have given you more time than I could well afford to spare so small an investment, because I remembered you as my boyhood friends. I shall be glad to drop the matter." And then, quite against his will, he looked at Persis.

She sat straight and pale, her eyes steely, her lips grim. And once he had kissed those lips, and those contemptuous eyes had poured into his, faith and love unstinted. As he stumbled toward the door, the thought crossed his mind that the boy who had won the love and respect of Persis Dale was not the poor dolt he had thought him. The years had brought loss as well as gain.

"Good morning." He made an effort to speak with his customary easy self-possession, and Mr. Hornblower's answer was to slam the door upon him. "Good riddance to damned bad rubbish," he roared.

"Robert!" screamed Mrs. Hornblower. "Profanity at your age. Twice in five minutes."

"Hold your tongue!"

The mental collapse of Mrs. Hornblower was physically evident. Flabby and shaken, she sat looking with unfeigned terror at her metamorphosed lord and master. And Mr. Hornblower, puffing out his chest, looked very much like the oldest son of the individual he had appeared an hour previous.

"I've got a word to say to you, Lena," remarked the reconstructed Mr. Hornblower. "Women are all right when they keep their place. After this I want to have it understood I'm not going to have any

interference in my business." He walked to the door and turned for a parting defiance. "Damned if I will."

Mrs. Hornblower's attack of hysterics occupied Persis till noon. She looked pale and heavy-eyed as she alighted from her car at her own door. She was about to enter when an object on the lawn caught her eye. Tacked to an upright stake driven into the turf, was a flapping piece of brown paper on which appeared straggling letters, executed in colored chalk.

"Notiss

"I will not klene my teth agen onles I get a nikle a weak Malcolm Dale."

Persis read this defiance twice, and her lips twitched. She turned toward the house, but by this time the children had espied her and shriekingly descended upon her, "like the plagues of Egypt," thought Mary, watching from the window.

"What makes you look that way?" cried Celia, clutching Persis' hand. "I don't like it."

"What way, child?"

"As though you was a widow."

Persis laughed, thereby diminishing her resemblance to the mourner of Celia's fancy. With a

child holding fast to each hand, and the others prancing about her and getting underfoot like so many kittens, she made her way indoors. "Children been good, Mary?"

"Why, yes'm," Mary admitted with reserve. "I gave Algie that cough mixture same as you said, and Malcolm he kept coughing fit to tear his throat to pieces. Betty says he likes the sirupy taste. And Celia teased the baby kissing her till she got her crying."

"I like the taste of the baby," remarked Celia, who had lent an attentive ear to the account of the family misdemeanors. "It's like tooth powder, the pink kind."

"A letter came for you, Miss Dale. Now, my gracious, what's happened to it? I put it right here on the table."

Inquiry divulged the fact that a game of postman had been in progress in the course of the morning, various letters from Persis' desk being posted at different points about the house to await collection. After some search the latest arrival was discovered under the cushions of the couch and Persis opened it with interested haste, its size and weight immediately suggesting the nature of its contents. Her premonition was confirmed by the engraved enclo-

sure whereby Mrs. Honoria Walsh announced the marriage of her niece, Miss Enid Randolph, to Mr. Washington Thompson on Tuesday, June the third.

Persis sat gazing at Enid's wedding cards while the unhappy face of the girl in the hotel writing-room grew distinct before her mental vision. And as she pondered, the hate that had looked at her out of Justin's eyes suddenly became a thing of trivial importance, and Mrs. Hornblower's sobs and shrieks even less worthy of consideration. She had prevented this girl, a stranger, from making shipwreck of her life. She had kept an elderly couple from disappointment and loss and possible poverty. The office of meddler-in-chief might frequently be thankless, but it was not without its own peculiar perquisites and compensations.

"Two good jobs done and off my mind," thought Persis, and then aloud: "Mary, if there's anything in the house for sandwiches, I believe we'll all go on a picnic this afternoon. I feel like celebrating."

CHAPTER XXI

DE PROFUNDIS

IN the unabashed pursuit of pleasure into which Persis had plunged, Joel was a half-hearted participant. His life-long habit of standing scornfully aloof while his fellow beings strove to enjoy themselves, proved no match for Celia's artless appeals. "Please come, Uncle Joel," she would coax. "It's lots more fun with you along." And to the open amusement of his neighbors and his sister's ill-concealed wonder, Joel submitted to long automobile rides, to briefer excursions on the river and lake and to eating picnic luncheons with his back against a tree and on his face an expression conveying his unshaken conviction that there were ants in his sandwich. It is unlikely that Joel's presence on these occasions added in any marked degree to the general hilarity, but Celia's satisfaction was unmistakable. She always sat beside him with an air of proprietorship, digging her sharp

little elbow into the sparse cushioning of his lean thighs or when weary, dropping her frowsy head against his shoulder with an engaging certainty that it was there for that very purpose. Like many another who has defied capture till after middle life, Joel atoned for past immunity by the thoroughness of his surrender.

But on this particular August morning, when an all-day expedition had been planned to Huckleberry Mountain, Joel revolted. Whether he had really been surfeited with picnics, or only feared that he might grow to enjoy such puerile forms of entertainment, and so lose some of the austere dignity which had hitherto distinguished him, it is certain that he came down to breakfast with his mind made up. Even to Celia's coaxing he was adamant.

"You mustn't tease Uncle Joel any more," Persis finally admonished the child. "You don't want him to go if he wouldn't have a good time." And to her brother she added, "You'd better go to the hotel for your dinner, Joel."

"Oh, I can pick up something that'll do me for a dinner," Joel replied with his old keen relish for playing the martyr. And then Celia, dropping her oatmeal spoon, lurched forward in her chair and imprinted a milky kiss upon his coat sleeve.

"I'll get Uncle Joel's dinner," Celia murmured. "I'll take care of him."

"But you're going on the picnic."

"No, Aunt Persis," Celia resumed an upright position with a suddenness that endangered her half-emptied bowl of porridge. "I don't like picnics 'thout Uncle Joel. I'd rather stay with him."

Joel groped for the toast. The plate was directly in front of him, but he could not see it for a blinding rush of tears. Never in his life had he known such sweet elation, never such humility. There is an irresistible flattery in the preference of a child. Except for the love of his dead mother and for his sister's affection, the latter a curious blending of duty and traditional sentiment which would have kept on working automatically whatever he might have done, Joel had never inspired a single unselfish attachment until Celia came into his life. The thing was overwhelming. His hand shook till his fork clattered against his plate. What was he to have won the heart of a child?

In the two hours that elapsed before their departure, he suffered agonies of apprehension that Celia would change her mind. Scraps of cynical comment on the fickleness of her sex, some of them dating back to Virgil and Juvenal, flitted through his mem-

ory and stung like gad-flies. After winning such honor, after Celia had elected to remain with him, he felt himself unable to endure the ignominy of having her reconsider. While Mary made the beds, and Persis packed the luncheon in the kitchen, and the children raced about getting in one another's way, and prolonging the preparations they were desirous of hastening, Joel waited in a cold sweat, half realizing the absurdity of his misgiving, but quite at its mercy. He knew that if Celia changed her mind at the last minute and departed with the others, life would not be worth the living.

But the elf-like little creature showed no signs of vacillation. After rendering valuable assistance in getting the others ready, including the feat of breaking a fruit jar containing the lemon juice and sugar, she came and stood at Joel's side, serenely contemplative and content. Even toward Celia Joel had never been demonstrative. But as the picnic party took possession of the machine, and half a dozen hands waved a farewell, he slipped his arm about the child's shoulders and drew her to him. The day was edged with gold. The warm August sunshine seemed to reach the very depths of his heart. He had a confused impression that he had done life an injustice.

"Tell me a story, Uncle Joel," commanded Celia, nestling closer. "Tell me about Miranda and Ariel and that horrid old Caliban." For to reduce Shakespeare to the juvenile comprehension had been one of the tasks imposed on Joel by his new fealty, nor did it seem to him, as once it might have done, a base perversion of the matchless creations of the English tongue that in diluted and modified form, they should interest and entertain a little maid of six.

The morning was a long rapture for the two strange comrades. Joel told stories till Celia tired of a passive rôle and entertained him with some of those flights of fancy compared with which the most audacious attempts of the adult imagination seem tame and groveling. Then they took a walk, hand in hand, after which Celia discovered that she was hungry and a raid was made upon the pantry. Perhaps nothing so conclusively proved the completeness of Joel's subordination as the overthrow of his dietetic theories. The first course of their meal was bread and molasses and it wound up with honey and ginger snaps.

By this time the sun had taken full possession of the front piazza, and Joel pulled his chair around to the shady north side of the house and sat there in after-dinner tranquillity while Celia played

about on the lawn. Joel's eyes followed every movement of the quaint little figure. He remembered with wonder that other people thought Betty the prettier of the two girls. To him that small piquant face with the unruly hair, the straight black brows and the wonderful kindling eyes, embodied all that was beautiful. His selfish middle-aged heart ached under the strain of accommodating this wealth of sweet swelling tenderness.

Celia had wandered across the grass toward the clump of maples which once had shaded the big barn erected in Joel's youth and never rebuilt after the fire. She turned to kiss her hand, and he kissed his back, the first time in a matter of some five and thirty years that his dignity had so unbent. The realization that the act would prove highly diverting to his neighbors caused him to glance anxiously toward the road. But the white ribbon of dust was undisturbed by vehicles, and his mind relieved, he looked again for Celia.

A full half minute he stared incredulously, looking this way and that, wavering between startled apprehension and a conviction of his own folly. For Celia was nowhere to be seen. The grass over which her little feet had twinkled as he turned his head, rippled in the wind and gave no sign. The child had

not had time to reach the trees, behind whose trunks her slight form might easily be concealed. And then as Joel told himself that he was a fool, a faint wailing cry brought him to his feet.

He was running before he had time to formulate his fear. And then a startling memory spurred him to more desperate haste. He recalled the old well by the barn, boarded over years before and later so concealed by the encroachment of grass and weeds that its very existence had been forgotten. But time had taken its toll even from the stubborn oak, and at last it had yielded under a child's light weight. Joel knew it as he ran, but the sight of the splintered irregular opening, across which the clover heads nodded serenely to one another, gave a poignant anguish to his realization. He tore the rotting planks aside, and looked as it seemed, down into unrelieved blackness. Then his sun-dazzled vision adjusted itself to the gloom and he saw the dank, slime-covered stones that formed the sides of the well, and below the black gleam of water and something pink and white, that struggled and went under, and showed again.

"Celia, Celia!" Joel shouted. "Don't be scared. Uncle Joel's coming."

He had been a coward all his life. In his boyhood

he had shrunk away from risks which to Persis were exhilarating and delightful. The ill health of twenty years had tended to confirm and increase that native weakness. Yet at this supreme moment no thought of his own danger crossed his mind. The saving of Celia was all.

He kicked off his slippers and gripping the curb for support, lowered himself into the pit. A rush of cold air like a breath from an open grave enveloped him. Finding foothold in the crevices of the green damp stones, digging his fingers into slimy crannies, panting, slipping, bruising his flesh without feeling the hurt, this frail hypochondriac went to the aid of the child who somehow had blundered into his heart.

The water in the well reached Joel's arm-pits as he stood on its bottom and lifted Celia to his shoulder. She clung to him for a little with a suffocating grip, strangling, sobbing, panic-stricken. And as he strove to soothe her, for the first time fear laid its cold hand upon him. He looked up to the circle of blue sky so terrifyingly distant and it seemed incredible that he could ever have made that precipitous descent. Unencumbered he had accomplished the miracle, but he knew he could never climb back to the warm peace of the upper air with Celia in his arms.

The child's sobs were quieting. She was perched upon his shoulder, her arm wound tightly about his neck. Even at the moment when all the tragic possibilities of the event crowded on his mind, he felt the tremor of her rigid little body and thought anxiously that Celia was in danger of taking cold.

With an effort he took a grip upon realities. Gently he loosened the pressure of the child's encircling arms.

"Celia, honey, don't hold Uncle Joel so tight. He's got to get breath enough to holler, so somebody will come and take us out of this."

He had shouted till he was hoarse before he realized his folly. There were no neighbors near enough to hear his cries. The sensible thing was to husband his strength till some vehicle passed and then call lustily. Again he addressed the child.

"Celia, dearie, keep your ears open. When we hear wheels coming, we'll holler for all we're worth."

They listened till they heard upon the road the rhythmic foot-beats of horses, and the rattle of some farmer's wagon rumbling homeward from the village. Then together they screamed for help. But the hoofs went on beating their tattoo till the sound grew faint, and the rattle of the wagon died in the

distance. Again and again the sound which told of human nearness woke hope in their hearts only to die in the ensuing silence.

"Uncle Joel," Celia wailed, "I'm co-old." Her sobs echoed uncannily as if the well were filled with the ghosts of weeping children. Again he gazed at the disk of blue sky overhead. He seemed to himself to be viewing it from some indeterminate halfway house between life and death. And yet of the two, the invisible world seemed nearer than the earth roofed over by that placid sky.

As time passed his suffering became acute. The weight of the child on his shoulder was an increasing torture. The cramped arm raised to hold her secure was racked by intolerable pain. The chill of the water was paralyzing. His heart labored. His breath came with difficulty. Celia seemed to be relapsing into an unnatural drowsiness. Her body sagged lifelessly. He found it necessary to stand close to the side of the well, that the wet stones might help to support her weight.

There was only once he prayed, unless his struggle be counted as one long prayer. But when his appeal found words, it was less a petition than a suggestion. "She's so little, Lord, for it to end here,

and she's had a hard time so far. The fun's just beginning." It showed no lack of wisdom, perhaps, that his prayer ended there.

His mind must have wandered a little later. It seemed as if his mother were beside him, encouraging him as she had done long before in his boyhood when he had wrestled with a difficult task. And then he was out in the woods with a crowd of his boyhood companions and the wild geese were flying south. Honk! Honk! Honk! "Guess that's why it's so cold," Joel said, addressing the shadowy assembly. "Winter's coming."

The sound of his own voice brought him back to reality. What he had heard was the horn of Persis' car. She had returned. And the love of life woke in him and gave him strength to scream lustily again and again.

As the children scrambled out upon the grass, all talking at once, Persis lifted an authoritative hand. "Hush! I thought I heard some one call."

"I don't hear nothing, Miss Dale," said Mary tranquilly. Persis again enjoined silence. As her gaze swept uneasily over the peaceful, familiar scene, her eyes were arrested by one of the rotting boards which had formed the cover of the unused well.

Joel, wrenching it from its place, had flung it out into the clover. It had not been there that morning, Persis knew.

She ran toward it with a conviction of calamity which only took concrete form when she heard her brother's call issuing from the depths of the earth.

"The well," she cried with self-accusing anguish. "The old well." But when she stood by its edge and sent her voice ringing down into its depth, it was steady and strong.

"I'm going for help, Joel. 'Twon't be much of any time now. Just a little longer."

Mary and the children had never seen the Persis who came running toward them. They shrank back from her stern presence, half afraid.

"Mary, take the children into the house and keep them there. Call up the doctor and tell him to get here as quick as he can. And have that coil of new rope that's in the shed ready for me by the time I'm back."

She had leaped into the machine while she was giving her orders. It described a dizzy circle in the grass, shot down the driveway, and sped screaming along the dusty road. Before the trembling Mary had had more than time to discharge her commissions the car was back with half a dozen strong

men, harvesters from the farm just below, crowded into the seats. And when Doctor Ballard turned his sweating horse up the drive half an hour later, Joel and Celia were between hot blankets, and stimulants had already stirred their sluggish blood.

It was eight o'clock before the doctor left. "I've got to see the Packard boy, or I wouldn't go. I'll come back and stay the night through."

Persis nodded. "I'd feel easier to have you in the house. There won't be no need for you to lose your sleep. The spare room's all made up."

Some twenty minutes later Joel roused and spoke. His respiration was hurried and articulation difficult.

"Persis—Celia?"

She understood the syncopated sentence.

"Celia's doing fine, the doctor thinks. She's got a little temperature, but a child's likely to have fever for any little thing."

He waited some time before putting the next question, rallying his strength for the ordeal of speech.

"Don't s'pose—'twould do for me—to see her?"

Persis looked at him with a curious tightening of the lips, in her eyes an unaccustomed blending of tenderness and pride.

"You shall see her, if you want to, Joel. 'Tain't going to hurt her—to speak of."

From the room across the hall she brought Celia, a chrysalid child, sleeping heavily, closely wrapped in an old plaid shawl, and laid her on Joel's bed. Celia's thatch of black hair fell untidily across the pillow. The fever gave her olive skin an unwonted color. Joel made an ineffectual effort to lift his arm. Then as he desisted, sighing, his sister gently lifted his hand till it touched the hot fingers of the sleeping child.

"They're— such little— things— Persis." His labored breath made speech fragmentary. "It's funny, how—they fill up—all the room in—a man's heart."

"Yes, I know, Joel. But I guess maybe you'd better not talk."

"Makes me think of—what the Good Book says, Persis. 'A little child—'"

He did not finish the quotation. After Persis was sure that he was asleep, she carried Celia back to her bed and renewed her watch. The doctor came in about ten o'clock and stood for a little with his fingers on his patient's pulse.

"You'd better not lose your sleep, Doctor," Persis suggested, glancing at the weary young face. "You go into the spare room and I'll call you if I need you."

"I'm not tired," the doctor answered. "I'd as soon sit here for a while." But he did not meet her eye.

It was an hour later when the struggling breath lengthened into a sigh, deep-drawn and profound, irresistibly suggestive of untold relief. The doctor was at the bedside instantly, but after a moment he laid the limp hand gently down and turned away.

Persis sank upon her knees, putting her hands over her face down which the tears were streaming, those strange illogical tears which are life's tribute to death, however it may come. Yet even while she wept, phrases of thanksgiving sang melodiously through her brain and echoed in her heart. For to this brother of hers it had been given to redeem a life of weakness and failure by a single heroic sacrifice and to die a man.

CHAPTER XXII

EAVESDROPPING

THE winter following Joel's death was unusually severe and to Persis seemed well-nigh endless. Though Celia had escaped the attack of pneumonia anticipated by the doctor, her long hours of exposure, coupled with the shock, had told on the sensitive child, and it was months before she seemed her usual blithe, audacious self. Without question Celia sorely missed her vanished play-fellow, and Persis, who had postponed her entering school for another year, because she did not feel that the child was strong enough for the confinement of the school room, sometimes doubted her own wisdom and was half convinced that the companionship of other children and the distraction of Celia's thoughts would have proved sufficient advantage to counterbalance all drawbacks. The others of Persis' flock with occasional digressions varying in seriousness from chilblains to croup, maintained as satisfactory a health

average as the mother of a young family can expect.

After the unprecedented severity of the winter the spring came early, as if nature had repented her harshness and had set herself to make amends. The sparkle came back to Celia's eyes and the lilt to her voice. The children who had been models of deportment while the cold lasted, developed a frisky unruliness, resulting in Malcolm's playing truant and Algie's coming home with a black eye, trophy of his first fight. Persis was too thankful over being able to raise every window in the house and have the sweet spring air flooding in upon her, to take these enormities very much to heart. Indeed, she was almost too busy to deal with the culprits as they deserved.

After two years in which she had hardly touched a needle, except for the children's little garments, Persis was again busy dressmaking. For she had not forgotten her promise to Diantha Sinclair, and Diantha's wedding-day was approaching, simultaneously with her eighteenth birthday. Backed up by Persis, Diantha had declared her intentions and put in a plea for a church wedding. And when her mother stormed and threatened, Diantha made her defiance.

"Oh, very well, mama. Only I'm going to be married in church. And if you won't give me a wedding, Miss Persis will."

In a frenzy Annabel appealed to her husband. Since he felt as keenly as she in the matter of what he called "Miss Dale's unwarrantable interference," their mutual indignation was actually proving a bond between that ill-mated pair. Since Persis had committed the indiscretion of reminding her of her age, Annabel had never spoken to her quondam dressmaker, and even such a crisis as the present could not bring her to the point of submitting to another interview, in which she might hear other truths equally unwelcome. It was her husband who faced the enemy.

Persis listened unperturbed while he stated his grievance. "Mr. Sinclair, if it hadn't been for me that girl of yours would have been married a year ago. It would have been a runaway match if I hadn't coaxed her into giving up and waiting until she could marry with the law to back her up in doing as she pleased. I made Diantha some promises then, and I'm going to keep 'em."

"Your conscience is too tractable, I suppose, to trouble you over setting a young girl like Diantha against her parents."

Persis regarded him with a slow smile, the significance of which Sinclair plainly had no difficulty in understanding. He flushed to the roots of his whitening hair.

"Mr. Sinclair, when a girl's happy at home, I do think it's a pity for her to jump into being a woman at eighteen. More'n one I've coaxed into waiting. But when a girl's disposition is wearing thin through bickering and nagging day in and day out, the sooner she's in a home of her own the better."

"I am glad you are ready to guarantee the success of this affair for which you are so largely responsible," remarked Mr. Sinclair. This was more of a home-thrust than he knew, but Persis did not wince.

"As for guaranteeing that anybody's going to be happy anywhere, Mr. Sinclair, only the Almighty can do that. My idea is that Diantha has a better chance with a young man who loves her than with a mother who is jealous of her and a father who hasn't got the courage to take her part."

"If you're going to fall back on vilification, Miss Dale," remarked the other participant in the dialogue, plainly in a towering rage, "the sooner this interview terminates, the better."

"Well, Mr. Sinclair, I guess you're right about that. Talking things over won't convert either of

us. And you understand," continued Persis, following her caller to the door, "that you're not to feel driven to give Diantha a church wedding. Only if you don't, I will."

It was due to Persis' effective championship that Diantha's wedding bade fair to prove what the reporter of the *Clematis Weekly News* called "A social event of almost metropolitan importance." There were to be bridesmaids and ushers and a best man. Admission to the church was by card, and the ensuing reception at the home of the bride's parents was scheduled to set a new pace for Clematis society. And while Annabel, inwardly raging, struggled to put a bold face on her defeat, Persis was busy with the gown she was resolved to make her masterpiece. The children were not allowed to enter the room where the work was progressing, though they sometimes took awe-stricken peeps through the crack at the mysterious, sheet-draped object suspended from hooks, and in the twilight taking on an aspect distinctly ghostly. It was necessary, too, to carpet the floor of the workroom with sheets when Diantha had a fitting, all of which added enormously to the romance and mystic glamour inevitably connected with a wedding dress. The children, with

whom Diantha had always been a prime favorite, instead of rushing tumultuously to meet her, now stood off when she presented herself, and looked her over, as if like the dress in Persis's workroom, she had become enveloped in mystery.

Mingled with the scraps of white satin which littered the floor were scraps of black silk. After the wedding-day had been fixed upon, the mother of the groom swept down upon Persis, wheedling and peremptory by turns.

"Persis Dale, I don't care if you *are* worth enough to buy and sell me twice over, you've got to make me a dress to wear to my boy's wedding. It's no use for you to shake your head. Persis, I ain't had a waist-line since you went out of business. And when I think how Annabel Sinclair's going to be rigged out, I'm worried for fear Thad will be ashamed of me. They say she's going up the city every week for fittings, just as if she was going to be the bride 'stead of Diantha."

It was clearly reprehensible in Mrs. West after throwing herself on Persis' sympathy and carrying her point, to be late to a fitting. Persis, who planned to clear the cobwebs from her tired brain by an exhilarating spin in her car at four o'clock, had ap-

pointed two for Mrs. West to try on the black silk. By quarter past she was fidgety, and as the clock struck the half hour, she waxed indignant.

"Now, Etta West needn't think I'm going to put myself out to make her dress if she can't keep her appointments. Folks that ask favors ought to be particular not to make any more trouble than they can help."

Another ten minutes of waiting quite exhausted Persis' store of patience. She stepped into the kitchen where Mary's sister was helping Mary with the extra work due to Persis' engrossing activities.

"Keep an eye on Celia and the baby, girls. If they say they're hungry try 'em with bread and butter without any sugar. I'll probably be back before the rest get home from school, but if I'm not here, tell 'em not to go away. We'll have a good ride before supper."

The West dwelling had that look of peaceful complacency characteristic of well-ordered establishments in mid-afternoon. Persis entered by the unlocked kitchen door, carrying Mrs. West's skirt over her arm. "Mis' West," she called challengingly, "Mis' West." And then as the silence remained unbroken, she found her irritation evaporating in anxiety. Could anything be wrong? "Mis' West,"

she called again at the foot of the stairs, and an observer could have argued from her altered voice a corresponding psychological change.

A sound answered her, something between a grunt and a groan, and sufficient to send her scurrying up the stairs with a marked acceleration of the pulse. Her vague foreboding took shape when as she reached the upper hall, she caught sight of a prostrate figure, partially visible through a half-open door. "A stroke!" thought Persis, and the black silk slipping from her arm, dropped in an unheeded heap.

The recumbent figure did not move as Persis flew down the hall, but as she entered the room, the head stirred slightly as if to look in her direction. Persis dropped upon her knees.

"Can you understand me, Etta?" she spoke with terrifying gentleness.

"Don't be a fool, Persis Dale." The vehemence of the rejoinder was startling. "Why shouldn't I understand?"

"Then it's just a fall, is it?"

Mrs. West hesitated before replying. "No," she returned in a tone of marked irritability, "I didn't fall."

"Then what's the matter?"

"I didn't say there was anything the matter, did I?" Mrs. West's ill humor seemed to be gaining on her. "I s'pose if a body wants to lie down for a while—in her own room—after her day's work is done—her neighbors haven't any real call to make a fuss."

The amazed Persis continued in a kneeling position, her bewilderment rendering her incapable of movement.

"You mean that you're lying here—because you like it?"

"On a warm day," said Mrs. West with dignity, "a floor's cooler than a bed and it saves mussing the spread."

Persis studied her thoughtfully. "I can't say you look cool, Mis' West. I guess I never saw you so fire-red as you are at this minute. But if that's your idea of having a good time, why, every one to his taste, as the old woman said when she kissed the cow."

She rose with a dignity that matched Mrs. West's own and moved toward the door. "Maybe you remember that you had an appointment for a fitting at two," she suggested coldly. "I brought your dress over, but of course if you're busy enjoying yourself—"

"Persis Dale," cried Mrs. West, her voice breaking, "I didn't think you had it in you to be so hard-hearted."

Slowly Persis retraced her steps. Her prostrate friend was weeping. Large impressive tears rolled slowly over cheeks whose fiery hue suggested the possibility that each drop might immediately be converted into steam.

"Mis' West," began Persis in a tone of strained patience, "will you please tell me if you've taken leave of your senses or what?"

Mrs. West's tears flowed faster. Hysterical tremors agitated the recumbent mass. "I—I can't get up," she exploded at length, in seemingly reluctant confidence.

"Can't get up? But how did you get down?"

"Persis—I—I was rolling."

"Rolling!"

"To reduce, Persis. My cousin Aggie said she took off twenty pounds in ten weeks rolling half an hour a day. And I thought it was worth trying."

Persis suddenly averted her face.

"Don't laugh, Persis. It may be funny for a man to be fat, but it's a tragedy for a woman. I've been thinking how Annabel Sinclair will look at that wedding, with a figure like a girl of twenty-one, and

it didn't seem as if I could stand two hundred and twenty-six. But if rolling's a cure, I guess I started too late."

"Why can't you get up, Mis' West?" inquired Persis, regarding the prostrate woman with a becomingly serious countenance. "You haven't wrenched yourself, anywhere, have you?"

"Not that I know of, Persis. I didn't hear anythink snap. I guess I'm stalled, like a horse. Maybe if I wasn't quite so near the couch I could manage. If Thad or his father get home before I'm up, I'll never hear the last of it."

Realizing that her friend's apprehension was well grounded, Persis brought her strong muscles and resolute will to bear upon the problem. She had lifted many a sick patient too weak to turn upon his pillow, and she knew the trick of making every ounce of energy count. Inspired by her example, Mrs. West put forth all her strength and as a result of their combined efforts she rose with ponderous slowness into a sitting position. The rest was easy. With Persis boosting and panting encouragement, the unhappy exponent of other people's theories regained her feet and tottered to a chair.

"Goodness, gracious, Persis, I'm as limp as a wash-rag. No more rolling for me, not if I get

up to three hundred pounds." She looked at her friend appealingly. "Don't ask me to stand up and be fitted, Persis. There's no more starch in my knees than if they were pieces of string."

Persis made haste to disclaim any such intention. "What you want is a fan, Mis' West, and a cup of tea, to quiet your nerves down. You've got to get braced up before Mr. West comes in, or he'll be at you to find out what the trouble is. And when a man gets a little joke like this on his wife, he's bound to make it last the rest of his natural life."

Leaving her friend to compose herself, Persis hurried to the kitchen and brewed the restorative cup of tea she had recommended. As she carried it to her patient the telephone lifted up its voice.

Mrs. West counted the rings. "One, two, three, four. That's Nellie Gibson's call, Persis. I wish you'd listen and see if you can find out if Josephine Newhall has got there yet. Nellie's been talking of that visit all winter."

Persis complied unhesitatingly. In Clematis no kill-joy had arisen to question the propriety of listening to the conversation of the other subscribers to a party line. It was the universal understanding that one of the foremost if not the chief advantage in having a telephone, was the gratification to be de-

rived from overhearing the confidences of one's neighbors. To have denominated this eavesdropping, would have aroused general indignation.

Persis took down the telephone without a qualm and instantly recognized the high-pitched voice of Mrs. Gibson, Thomas Hardin's sister. She was speaking more loudly than is necessary in such conversation and with a seeming lack of amiability.

"Well if you won't come to supper to-night, when will you come? Set a time right now."

"Really I don't know, Nellie." Persis started as the gentle deprecating tones reached her ears. "I'm pretty busy at this season. I guess I hadn't better say—"

"Fiddlesticks and folderol! I know just how busy you are. I guess if Persis Dale hadn't thrown you over like a worn-out shoe, you'd have found time enough to get over to see her every blessed night of the world."

It was clearly the moment for Persis to hang up the receiver. Regrettable as it is to record, she listened with a seeming accession of interest for Thomas' reply. But his only answer was a discreet silence.

"When you talk of being busy," Mrs. Gibson continued witheringly, "I know what's in your mind.

You mean you won't come to this house while Josephine is here."

Still silence on the part of Thomas.

"Thomas Hardin," his sister burst out, "why don't you say something? I can stand a man that takes the roof off when he's mad lots better than the kind that shut up like clams. Are you coming to supper this week or not?"

"No, Nellie, I guess not."

"You mean you're not coming near the house while Josephine stays? Be a man. Speak out plain."

"Nellie," said the goaded Thomas, acting on her counsel, "I haven't got a thing against any friend of yours, but I'm tired of your match-making."

"Match-making!" Mrs. Gibson repeated, like most who adopt that most thankless of the professions ready on the instant to repudiate it. "Me!"

"Yes, Nellie, I'm not a suspicious man, but a child in arms could see through your little game. I dare say you mean it kindly, but when a man's not looking for a wife, it's embarrassing to have first one woman and then another thrown at his head."

"I suppose," commented Mrs. Gibson acridly, "you'd rather end up your days a pitiable old bachelor, mooning over the woman who played with you for a dozen years and threw you down at last."

"If she threw me down, 'twas because I deserved it."

"Deserve nothing. You haven't the sense to go in when it rains, Thomas Hardin, and a week-old kitten would beat you for gumption. But for all that, you're a long sight more of a catch than most men."

This impassioned tribute apparently left Thomas dumb. Mrs. Gibson followed up her advantage.

"I suppose you'd rather set in meeting and look at the back of Persis Dale's bonnet than to have a nice wife of your own in the pew beside you."

"Well, since you ask me, Nellie, I would."

"She's made you a laughing-stock. She don't care any more for you—"

"Of course she don't. Why should she? A woman like her."

"Then I wash my hands of you." Mrs. Gibson's voice suggested tears.

"Thank you, Nellie," Thomas returned gratefully, and his sister's receiver slammed into the hook. Thomas followed suit, and last of all, Persis Dale, after assuring herself that she was not likely to hear more, returned the receiver to its place and went to satisfy her friend's curiosity.

"Well?" Mrs. West had emptied her teacup and

the soothing effects of the potion showed in her altered voice.

"Yes, Josephine's there," Persis replied to the elliptical inquiry. "But I gathered from something that was let drop that maybe she wouldn't stay long. So if you want a visit with her you'd better not waste any time."

CHAPTER XXIII

WEDDING BELLS

THE wedding dress was finished and a success. "I guess it'll have to be my valedictory," Persis said with ill-concealed elation. "I'm never going to beat that if I dressmake till I'm a hundred." As for Diantha, her ecstasy implied that whatever the risks attached to the matrimonial venture, they were abundantly offset by the privilege of arraying one's self in habiliments of such transcendental charm.

But of the two, the girl's happiness was the least overcast. Diantha did not realize the pathos of her ability to leave her home without a pang. Since tears are only the reverse side of joy, the bride who says farewell to her girlhood dry-eyed is a legitimate object of sympathy. Diantha's unclouded happiness was significant of all that her youth had lacked.

But Persis' satisfaction was superficial. Under-

neath her stubborn cheer, her genial vivacity, self-reproach was astir. While she listened to the outpourings of Diantha's ardent confidence and laughed over the children's naive inquiries regarding the approaching and stupendous event, she stood a prisoner at the bar of her conscience, summoned to defend herself against the charge of injustice to a friend. And the more she pondered the question, the more advisable it seemed for her to plead guilty and throw herself upon the mercy of the court.

She recalled in extenuation of Thomas's offense that his confession had been strictly voluntary, prompted only by his own sense of honor. He might have retained the confidence and friendship he valued above all else, simply by holding his peace. Moreover his provocation had not been slight. "She looked so like a kitten," he had said of Annabel. Persis knew the look he meant, that inimitable blending of challenge and retreat, shyness and daring so commingled as to be most provocative. Of course he was no match for Annabel, poor honest Thomas.

"It's the good men they make the quickest work of," thought Persis, turning restlessly on an uneasy pillow. "It never would have entered Thomas' head to think any harm of a married woman. A different kind of man would be on his guard against her

and against himself, too. It came on Thomas like a thunder-clap out of a clear sky."

Having reached the point of leniency toward her one-time lover, severity with herself was a natural sequence. "'Tain't as if I was a girl," Persis owned, in sorrowful compunction. "I'd ought to know what men are by this time, and that the best of 'em need to be braced up by some good woman's backbone." She could not escape from the painful conviction that she had failed her friend. He had turned to her for help and her hurt pride had rendered her oblivious to his need.

And pride was still to be reckoned with. Even now when she realized her fault, she shrank from extending the olive branch. Thomas loved her and had always loved her. The episode of Annabel Sinclair had not altered his loyalty by so much as a ripple on the surface. And yet to show by a lifted eyelash or a hand held out that she was ready to let bygones be bygones seemed among the impossibilities. The generations of dumb women whose blood ran in her veins stretched out ghostly hands to hold her back from frankness. That was a woman's lot, to endure silently and leave the initiative to the man.

June came and found her vacillating and uncer-

tain. Mystic fragrances, still whispery nights, dewy mornings, gay with flowers, were flung into the scale. And when Diantha's wedding was but two days off, Persis suddenly capitulated.

"I've always said that folks who'd let their lives go to smash for want of speaking out deserved all they got. And now it looks as if I was that sort of a fool myself. Algie!" Apparently apprehensive that common sense would again yield the field to tradition, she flew to the window. "Algie!" she shrieked.

The boy came on the run. Something in Persis' voice made him aware that the occasion did not admit of trifling.

"Algie, jump on your wheel and ride down to Mr. Hardin's store. Tell him that if it's convenient I'd like to see him this evening. Quick now."

Algie's obedience was instantaneous. With compressed lips Persis watched his vanishing figure, her color coming and going.

"Well, so far, so good. I guess now I've got up my courage to send for him I can leave the rest to luck."

Thomas came that evening, extremely self-conscious in a new suit, his air of unwonted elegance heightened by a fresh shave and with his shoes pol-

ished into almost immodest prominence. The children, in spite of their aggrieved protests, had been sent to bed with the chickens. Mary had been despatched to young Mrs. Thompson's on an errand, and the two had the house to themselves. Thomas waited for Persis to explain her summons. As she rendered him no assistance, he took the responsibility of steering the conversation.

"I looks pretty fine round here, Persis. Shouldn't hardly know the place."

"Well, there have been lots of changes, Thomas, Joel gone and all. Five children in a house change things without anybody to help 'em."

"They're nice-looking children, too. That oldest boy, Algie, takes my eye."

"He'll be better-looking when that cut on his lip heals up. He got hurt in a fight the other day, the second he's had in three months. I wanted to ask you what you thought I'd ought to do when he gets to fighting."

Thomas' heart went down with a thud. So this was why she had sent for him, to consult him regarding the training of the boys. He had not known how her summons had inflated his hopes until this sickening collapse. It was only by an effort that he rallied his thoughts sufficiently to answer.

"Well, I wouldn't worry about that if I was you, Persis. Seems like all young things was taken the same way. Puppies are always squabbling, but 'tisn't that there's any hard feeling. They just want to try their teeth. Seems to me I'd be pretty worried over a boy who never wanted to fight."

Persis listened appreciatively. "Thank you, Thomas. It's a good thing for a woman who's bringing up a pair of boys to get a man's point of view now and then. I'm afraid I've kind of neglected those children this spring. I've been so taken up with Diantha Sinclair's wedding."

"She'll be a mighty pretty bride," observed Thomas, striving manfully to do his part in the conversational see-saw. "She looks a lot like her mother when—" He broke off, overwhelmed by the realization that he had introduced the one topic which should never have been mentioned between Persis and himself. Choking with mortification, turning deeply crimson as all the blood in his body seemed rushing toward his brain, he sat motionless, an unhappy martyr consumed in the fires of his own sensitiveness.

But something had given Persis a clew. She leaned forward, quite forgetful of her recent shrinking.

"Thomas, you remember what you told me about Annabel Sinclair the last time you were here?"

"Lord!" he panted, but her gaze held him mercilessly. "I'm not likely to forget it."

"What I want to know is this. How old was Annabel when—when you kissed her?"

Thomas drew out his handkerchief and mopped his damp forehead.

"Why, I s'pose she was fifteen or sixteen. She wasn't as tall as Diantha is, and I guess she was a few years younger."

Persis did not reply. When he ventured to look in her direction, she was regarding him with strange dilated eyes.

"Thomas, you said she was Stanley Sinclair's wife."

"Well, she is, isn't she? Why, you don't mean—" He interrupted himself, his look changing. "What kind of a man d'ye think I am, Persis Dale?" he challenged her angrily. "If you've known me all your life and think I'm the sort to be carrying on with other men's wives—well, I guess I'd better be going."

He got to his feet and then sank helplessly into a chair. He had never seen Persis cry before. He had

not realized that she could cry. Yet without doubt those were tears upon her cheeks.

But if crying, Persis was smiling, too. His heart fluttered, and performed some extraordinary gymnastic feat, when she held out her hand.

"Thomas, I was in the wrong, I'll own it. I never favored jumping at conclusions and less than ever now. Maybe—maybe if I hadn't thought so much of you, I'd have been slower to think evil."

He did not trouble himself with the feminine lack of logic indicated in her closing words. He had clasped her hand in both of his and was holding it fast, as if he never meant to let it go.

"Persis—Persis, you weren't fair to me in that, but I don't lay any claim to being all I'd ought to be. There's no end of things you'd have to forgive. I don't know as I've ever told you about the time Ed Collins and I—"

A movement on the part of Persis' disengaged hand checked his confession.

"Thomas," she protested while she smiled, "if you own up to any more things, I declare I believe I'll have to even up by telling you how old I am. And that's one thing a woman don't like to mention, except, of course, to her husband."

Two days later Diantha Sinclair was married at eight o'clock in the evening. The church was crowded. Wide-eyed girls took in every detail and dreamed of acting the star rôle on a similar happy occasion. Complacent matrons, in their Sunday best, exchanged voluble comments. The wedding party was a trifle late, and the guests were all early which gave opportunity for soul-satisfying gossip.

"Ain't those flowers lovely! I never saw anything to beat 'em except maybe, at Elder Larkins' funeral. They say Persis Dale went over to the Lakeview florist's in that car of hers and brought back flowers enough to fill a wash tub."

"Mis' West looks real nice in that new black silk. There's nothing like black for toning down a fat woman."

"There's Eddie Ryan in a dress-suit. Wonder if it's his'n or just borrowed. It hangs kind of baggy. Shouldn't wonder if his cousin up to Boston let him take his."

Annabel Sinclair's slight girlish figure was the center of interest until the entrance of the bridal party. She must have guessed how the tongues were wagging but her color did not fluctuate under the ordeal. At last Annabel had come to the point of assisting nature. The carmine had been applied

with artistic restraint, and she had never looked lovelier, but her happiness in her beauty had vanished. To retain the admiration which was the breath in her nostrils, she must henceforth resort to artifice, covering up and hiding what would sooner or later be revealed in spite of her. She was not thinking of Diantha as she sat looking straight before her but only of her own hard fate.

"Annabel Sinclair might be the bride herself," remarked one kindly matron on the other side of the church. "Beats all how she keeps her looks."

"Ain't that a handsome dress, though," sighed her companion. "She had it made in the city. But Persis Dale made Diantha's dress, and somebody who saw it, told me it was the handsomest thing she ever clapped her eyes on. Persis Dale sets everything by that girl."

If the occupants of the pews enjoyed the long wait, not so Thad West. Pale and perspiring, he looked more like a patient about to be conveyed to an operating table, than a bridegroom on the threshold of his happiness.

"What do you s'pose is wrong, Scotty?" He clutched the arm of the friend selected to stand by him in this ordeal. "It's way past time."

"Oh, well, girls are always late," returned Scotty

with soothing intent. Thad thought wrathfully that it was all very well for him to take that tone. He wasn't going to be married, hang it.

"Ring all right, Scotty?"

"Sure thing." But in spite of the prompt assurance the best man's hand went to his waistcoat pocket and fumbled a long nervous minute while the perspiration trickled down Thad's spine. And then young Scott felt in the other pocket and breathed a sigh of relief. "Here 'tis."

"You want to keep better track of your dates than that," exclaimed Thad angrily. "You'll queer everything if you go feeling around in all your pockets when he's ready for the ring." His voice took on a tone of appeal. "Haven't you got an extra handkerchief, Scotty? If I keep on at this rate, my collar—"

"You just keep quiet and I'll mop you up a bit," returned the obliging Scotty, but his friendly ministrations were interrupted by a blood-curdling whisper from the bridegroom.

"My God, here they come."

There was no doubt about it. The little organ was wheezing out the wedding march as if it meant to be equal to the occasion if this proved its swansong. The ushers were advancing up the aisle two

by two. With drooping heads and measured steps, the bridesmaids followed, and then came Diantha on her father's arm. The little flutter that went over the waiting assembly was chiefly an involuntary tribute to her girlish grace and beauty, though the dress, too, came in for its share.

"Might have been bought in Paris for all anybody could tell," was the assurance passed from lip to lip. Clematis was proud of that wedding dress.

Stanley Sinclair, very straight and handsome as he moved up the aisle, looked down on the bright head near his shoulder and remembered that other girl who twenty years before had come up the church aisle to meet him at the altar. He had learned long before to sneer at his own lost illusions, but singularly enough, never until this moment had it occurred to him to wonder what her dreams might have been that far-away June day. To his discomfiture the query brought a pang, and he had thought himself beyond such weakness. The petrified heart has a certain advantage over that of flesh, though possibly the ache which proves it human is a ground for felicitation.

Ten minutes later Thad was wondering what he had been afraid of. Why, it was nothing. He could hardly believe that a matter so momentous could be

disposed of in so few minutes. And yet it was true, and Diantha's little hand was in his, to have and to hold till death did them part.

Diantha's composure throughout the ceremony had suggested that being married was an every-day matter to a person of her wide experience. Her poise and self-possession were the occasion of wondering comment among the many who were hardly able to realize even now that she had really grown up. It was not till the reception, when Persis with Thomas following bashfully in her wake came up to proffer her good wishes, that Diantha relapsed into youthfulness. She flung her arms about her old friend's neck and kissed her tumultuously.

"Darling Miss Persis, how perfectly lovely you look! Did you get that beautiful dress just for my wedding?"

The composition of Persis' reply apparently took a little time. She did not speak for a minute.

"Yes, I made it for your wedding," she returned at length. "But I used it for my own, too. Thomas and I slipped over to the minister's after supper and got married. So we'll both wish each other joy, my dearie."

It was a shock of course, but Clematis was getting used to that where Persis was concerned. And Mrs.

Hornblower voiced the feeling of more than herself when she commented on the affair at the next meeting of the Woman's Club. Persis was not present. She and Thomas had gone on a wedding trip to the seashore, and taken all the children.

"It's a kind of back-handed way of getting a family," said Mrs. Hornblower. "Picking up one child here and another there, and then winding up with a husband. But I must say it'll take a load off my mind to see a man at the head of Persis Dale's pew."

CHAPTER XXIV

FAIR PLAY

THE late October sunshine poured its prodigal gold into the little room of which Annabel Sinclair was the sole occupant, and as its single door and window were both closed, the resulting temperature was suggestive of mid-July. The room itself was plain and bare. The cottage Thad West had purchased the year following his marriage was needlessly spacious for the immediate requirements of the two young people and for that reason, several of the rooms had been left unfurnished or nearly so, until time should justify Thad's foresight. As a rule Annabel had a feline instinct for comfort, selecting the easiest chair and the pleasantest outlook almost unconsciously. To-day her discomfort and the convent-like austerity of her surroundings failed to impress her. She was hardly aware of them.

She was not in her daughter's home of her own volition that October morning. She had yielded as the most self-willed must on occasion to the assump-

tion of her little world that this was the place where she would wish to be. But the first glimpse of Diantha had convinced her that her shrinking recoil had been well-grounded. Diantha, deadly pale and yet with little flickering, unsteady smiles, Diantha, quiet and self-possessed, with nothing but those white cheeks to show how flesh and spirit shrank from the approaching ordeal, was terrifyingly a stranger. But that she was a woman there could be no doubt. And this woman, soon to be a mother, was her child.

The little, bare, remote room seemed a refuge. Annabel closed the door and would have locked it, but the key was missing. She sank into the single chair, her face storm-swept, transformed by her emotion almost beyond recognition. The natural assumption would have been that she was enduring vicariously the suffering of her daughter, bearing for the second time the pangs that had given Diantha life. As a matter of fact, Diantha's pain and peril were remote from her mood. Her mind had room for one thought: "Hast thou found me, O mine enemy!"

As she stared before her, hand gripping hand, her bloodless lips moving inarticulately, she saw the monstrous folly of her self-deception. She had

played at youth, listened to the love-making of undeveloped boys whose mother she might have been, and made herself believe that she could cheat Time. And Time, too, had had his fun. For the moment it almost seemed to her that her girlish prettiness had been his merciless concession to add to the spirit of the game, as a cat lets a mouse run with a sense of recovered freedom, only to pounce again.

And now she was to be a grandmother. She made a futile effort to face the thought, to adjust her idea of herself to so astounding a development. But it was like the effort to imagine herself belonging to another race, Ethiopian or Oriental. It was unthinkable. She had a clearly defined conception of grandmothers, persons with a generous waist-line and white hair. Undoubtedly they were useful people in their way, and worthy of regard. But she found it impossible to realize that she herself might belong to their number.

As if recalling some experience far distant, she fell to reviewing the events of the previous evening. Her caller had been a young fellow with a carefully nurtured and on the whole a promising mustache and with a lurid taste in socks. She had enjoyed the call. The boy's crude efforts at veiled sentiment, his languishing glances had been incense

to her vanity. But to-morrow! "How is your little grandchild, Mrs. Sinclair?" he would say. Or no! He would not say it. He would not come again. He must realize, as she was doing, the absurdity of their acquaintance. He would laugh at the old woman who had painted her cheeks that she might look a girl and had let him kiss her hand as though granting a priceless favor. Annabel moaned faintly as she writhed. Every one would laugh. Every one must have been laughing for years over her silly pretenses.

She did not know how long a time had elapsed before heavy footsteps creaked down the hall. She shuddered and her body stiffened. The knock was twice repeated before she could utter an audible, "Come in."

Mrs. West pushed the door ajar and started violently as her eyes fell on Annabel. As not infrequently happens with women who preserve an unnaturally youthful appearance, under the stress of deep emotion, Annabel had aged years in an hour. It was a moment before Mrs. West could recover herself.

"I've made us a cup of tea, Mis' Sinclair, and set out a light lunch. We'll both feel better for a bite."

Annabel shook her head. "I don't want—any-

thing." It took an effort to stifle a frenzied appeal to be left to herself.

This was far from Mrs. West's thoughts. She creaked into the little room, her ample proportions making it seem more cramped and small than ever, and patted Annabel's shoulder.

"Oh, come now, Mis' Sinclair, I know just how you feel."—Never was boast vainer.—"But Diantha's going to come through this all right. She's young and she's strong. The doctor says she's got everything in her favor."

Annabel's answer was a vague uncomprehending stare. Then she began to understand. Mrs. West supposed her consumed with anxiety for her daughter's safety, whereas the possibility that Diantha might die had hardly occurred to her. She found herself wondering if she were unlike all other women, an abnormality in her selfishness. In the larger matters Annabel had remained contemptuously indifferent to the opinion of her sex, though she would have found their criticism of her personal appearance disquieting. But now she was conscious of an unaccustomed sense of relief that Mrs. West could not read her thoughts.

"I don't want—anything," she repeated mechanically, and Thad's mother departed with obvious re-

luctance. In five minutes she was back with a cup of tea which Annabel swallowed in hopes of thus purchasing immunity from further kindly attentions. And Mrs. West, bearing away the empty teacup, carried too, a better opinion of Annabel Sinclair than she would have believed possible.

"I never thought she cared anything much for Diantha," she told Persis who had dropped in several times during the day to see how matters were progressing. "But I must say, I did her an injustice. She's been pretty nearly crazy all day. She looks like a ghost."

"Well, she's Diantha's mother when all's said and done," Persis responded. Happiness makes for tolerance. With all her charity for the wrong-doer, Persis had made an exception of Annabel Sinclair. But now the years of fatness, following instead of preceding the lean years, the overflowing fulness of her heart and life had taught her new indulgence. She was capable of believing that there was good in the woman.

The afternoon dragged cruelly. Now and then some faint sound reached Annabel, vaguely suggestive of the battle which must be waged for every new existence, and each time the sagging body of the woman stiffened, and her breath grew hurried.

Once Thad passed her window, his young face set and white, and his eyes reddened as if from weeping. Annabel shrank away fearful that his glance might fall on her, but the fixed eyes of the young husband saw only his wife's girlish face as he had seen it last, colorless, quivering, undaunted.

It was not far from four o'clock when the sound of hurrying feet quickened Annabel's lagging pulses. A door shut quickly and then another. Some one was hurrying down the hall; some one who brought news. Annabel found herself on her feet. And then, instinctively she caught at the back of her chair to support herself, for the floor was undulating and the sunny room had grown dark.

Out of the shapeless blur in which her surroundings blended, a face took shape, the face of Mrs. West, wet with tears and radiant with smiles. It was she who had sped so lightly down the long hall as if joy had given wings to her feet.

"It's a boy!" She laughed out the three exultant words and hurried back to some interrupted task. Annabel continued to stand. When at length she released her grip of the chair, her fingers were numb and stiff. The thought crossed her mind that now she was at liberty to go home, since her grandson

had come into the world, but the effort seemed beyond her strength. She sank into the chair again, half closing her eyes. The poignant pain of the past hours had changed to an overwhelming listlessness. She was too tired to think any longer, too tired even to suffer.

A brisk knock at the door roused her from her apathy sufficiently for a resentful wish that they would leave her to herself. Then the door opened and Persis entered. Her face wore the look that had impressed Annabel on the face of Mrs. West, that look of supreme satisfaction, blended with a curious, vicarious pride, and with it all, something that told of tears held back. Annabel's eyes went from that radiant look to the shawl-draped bundle in Persis' arms. She put out her hand as if to ward off a danger.

Persis halted, gazing in consternation at the wreck of Annabel. In that shallow face the record of mental anguish was so unmistakable that the other woman felt a pang of self-reproach.

"Here I've been leaving this poor little bundle of nerves to fight this thing through all alone. I'd ought to have known she'd be scaring herself into a conniption." As a reaction from the severity with

which she dealt with her own thoughtlessness, Persis' voice, in addressing Annabel was as tender and caressing as if she strove to soothe a troubled child.

"Well, Mis' Sinclair, your worry's over. Diantha came through this fine, and before we know it, she'll be up and about and as lively as a cricket. But it's been a hard day for you same as for the rest of us. The Lord asks a good deal of women, to help Him keep this old world a-going, but He's got His own way of making it up to 'em."

As if to give point to her words, Persis' eyes dropped to the bundle in her arms. She came a step nearer.

"I s'pose, of course, you're glad it's a boy. I don't know why it is, but you just can't help feeling tickled when the first baby's a boy. Nine pounds, too. That's a grandson to be proud of."

"Don't! Don't! I don't want to see it."

Annabel's cry was involuntary, wrung from her by the realization of Persis' purpose. And Persis who had lifted the shawl that concealed the little face, let it fall again and stood staring.

"You don't want—to see the baby?"

The revulsion indicated by Annabel's attitude was a sufficient answer. Persis crossed to the cot-bed and sat down. If there was a person on earth she

cordially detested, it was Annabel Sinclair, yet the conviction that this poor counterfeit of a woman was in need of strength and sympathy was sufficient to thrust that old dislike into the background.

"I guess to-day's been pretty trying to your nerves, Mis' Sinclair. But you'll feel better if you take a look at this nice boy. I've seen a good many of 'em first and last, and I told Diantha I'd never set eyes on a finer baby."

A curious distortion of Annabel's face broke off Persis' eulogy. "Are you feeling sick, Mis' Sinclair?" she asked in real alarm, thinking that she would never have given Annabel credit for this excess of material solicitude.

"Sick? Yes, I'm sick of everything. I'm glad that child's a boy. Those people that drown the girl babies like kittens, are in the right of it. No woman ought to live beyond thirty."

"Some of us," remarked Persis, recovering herself with difficulty, "would have missed a good deal at that rate." But her lips curled slightly. She was beginning to understand and to acquit herself of past injustice.

Annabel had reached a point where speech was a necessity. For years, she had returned Persis' dislike with the added venom of a small nature. But

at this moment, when an outpouring of confidence seemed essential, she knew there was no one to whom she could speak so freely as to this woman she had hated.

"Life's cruel, cruel! It promises us women everything. And then it cheats us and tricks us and takes away all that it gave, one thing after another. It's like bleeding to death, losing your beauty little by little, fighting your hardest and knowing you've got to be beaten in the end. When I was a child in bed I used to think I heard footsteps coming along the hall, slow and stealthy, and I'd lie there trembling and quaking, afraid to open my eyes. That's the way I've been listening to old age, creeping on me—for the last ten years."

"And if only you'd got your courage up to opening your eyes when you were a little, trembly thing, scared of those footsteps, like enough all you'd have seen beside your bed was your mother smiling down on you."

Annabel looked at the speaker without replying. Her look offered little encouragement for Persis o continue, but she needed no such incentive.

"You talk about life's being cruel. Why, you poor little soul, you don't know what life's like.

You've never given it a chance. You haven't played fair."

For years Persis had acknowledged to a desire to give Annabel Sinclair "a good talking to." On various occasions she had uttered truths that had cut like knives. She had the same truths to utter now, but the spirit had altered.

"I guess every girl that was ever born liked to have men courting her and ready to fight one another for a kind word from her. That's nature. But it ain't nature to have it last, Mis' Sinclair. And that's where you made your mistake. You wanted to keep right on pretending it was May after it got along to August or so."

Something she saw in the poor harassed face caused her to change her position slightly, so that she could pat the listless hand of Diantha's mother while she spoke.

"Life ain't cruel, you poor soul! It comes along with both hands full. It says to the little girl, 'Come, drop that doll-baby, I've got something better than that. Here's a lover for you.' And then it says to the girl that's picking and choosing among her beaux, 'Drop that flirting, I've got something better for you. Here's a husband and a home!' And so it

goes. Instead of getting poorer all the time, we're getting richer."

She looked at Annabel tentatively. She was not altogether sure that her eloquence was having effect. But as Annabel sat in an attitude of expectancy, her face turned toward her monitor, though her eyes were downcast, Persis tried again.

"I don't say Thomas and I haven't missed a lot, I'm not belittling youth and its love and its hopes. But I do say that I wouldn't change this last year of my life for any that might have been. Why, when I wake up in the morning, my head's full of the children, thinking of 'em and planning for 'em and sometimes worrying about 'em. It needs a little tart taste, sometimes, to bring out the sweet. Thomas and I have spent hours, trying to decide whether we'll make a doctor out of Algie, or a civil engineer, and we know both of us, that when the time comes, he'll take the bit in his teeth and do as he likes. Only it's such fun planning it out. When I look back five years or ten, or twenty, for that matter, and see how my life has filled up and widened out, I feel real sorry for that little, young, silly Persis Dale who thought she was so happy and knew so little about it. If life takes with one hand, Mis' Sin-

clair, it gives with two, only you'll never find it out as long as you grip tight to what you've got."

She looked down on the bundle in her arms, and again her face was irradiated by a vivid tenderness, almost as if she had been mother of the child.

"Now, here's a case in point, Annabel Sinclair. Right here in my arms is a little lump of joy that ought to fill up your cup of happiness so full that it would spill over. Seems to me if this little mite belonged to me, if I knew my blood was in his veins, this town wouldn't be big enough to hold me. I love my five, dear knows, but there's a hurt in thinking that I'm never going to see the Dale stubbornness cropping out or any of the Hardin ways. But you haven't got that little nagging hurt to take off your joy, like a pinch in a pair of new shoes. It's all along of you that this boy's here."

As if dominated by the stronger will, Annabel's eyes turned toward the bundle. And inwardly praying that this was the moment for her *coup d'état,* Persis started to her feet.

"I b'lieve that's Thad calling. 'Fraid like as not, that I'm going to kidnap his son and heir. You hold the baby, Mis' Sinclair, till I see what's wanted."

She had tucked the baby into the curve of his

grandmother's arm before Annabel could protest, and she left the room without looking back. Annabel, breathing fast, stared down into the little red face against her shoulder. Such a queer little face, wrinkled with the ponderous wisdom of the world it had so lately quitted, placid through ignorance of the new life into which it had entered. She could not turn away her eyes. And this being, newer than the morning paper and yet ancient as man, was flesh of her flesh.

The little, tightly clenched fists attracted her as irresistibly as the face. She surprised herself by poking one tentatively, and when the fingers opened and closed about hers, her lips parted as if to cry out. She had not dreamed that there could be such tenacity in those wee fingers. It was uncanny to be thus gripped by a creature so intensely new. And Persis had said that this was one of Heaven's good gifts, a joy that might brim life's cup over.

The door opened and she raised her eyes. Her husband stood there, gravely intent. She had never looked less beautiful than in her pale disorder, but the pathos of her drooping figure and bewildered face touched him strangely. Or perhaps it was the child in her arms.

"It's holding to my finger, Stanley! See!" Anna-

bel's features twisted in a strange distorted smile. "Our little grandchild."

He moved nearer. For all his efforts, he found it impossible to make his voice altogether matter-of-fact.

"You've had a hard day, I'm sure. You'd better speak to Diantha and then let me take you home."

She rose to her feet unsteadily, holding the child with the peculiar awkwardness of the woman in whom the maternal instinct is lacking. But as she passed on before him, her husband saw that the tiny hand still curled tendril-like about her finger.

THE END